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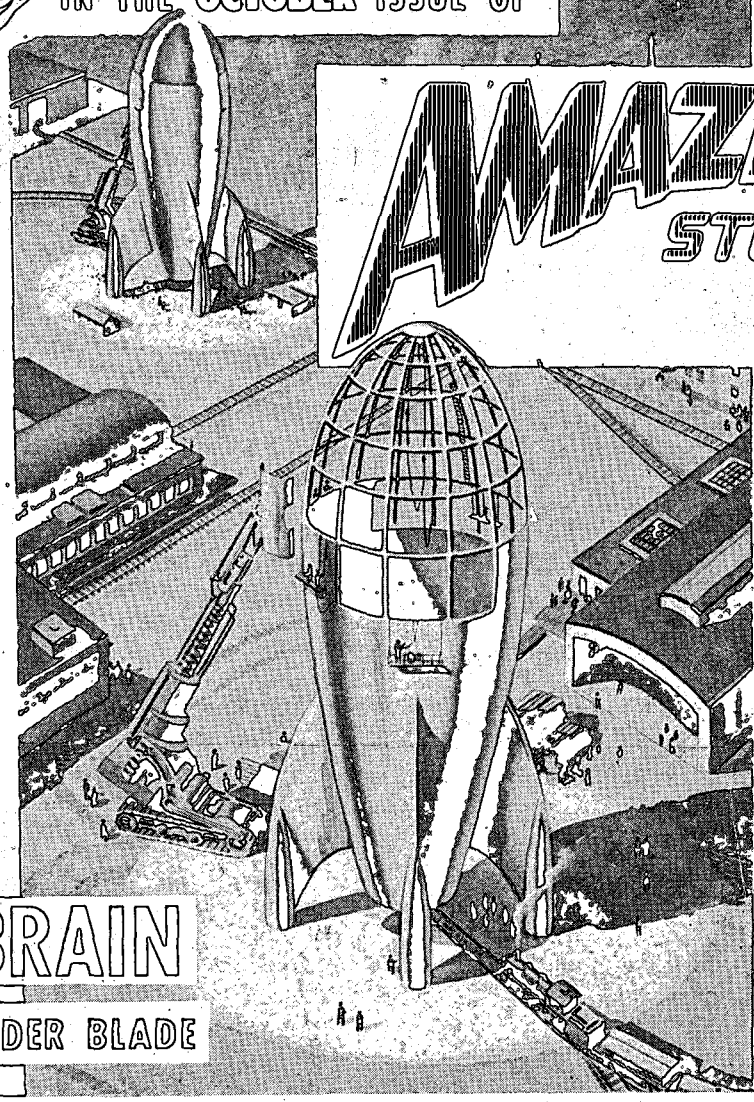

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by ALEXANDER BLADE

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Front cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones, illustrating a scene from "The Lavender Vine of Death."

FANTASTIC ADVENTURES

Volume 10 **Number 9**

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

THE last few issues of FA, and this one too, have been put out under what we might modestly call "adverse" conditions. We've been faced with a strike in the printing industry, and as a result we've been forced to make various changes in our format which you may have noticed. So we'd like to apologize for any and all deficiencies you may notice. We've received any number of letters complaining about the dropping of various departments, the proofreading, and other items. Well, we don't like it any more than you do, but for the moment there isn't very much we can do about it. So bear with us until things get back to normal. Then we'll have your favorite magazine back on its regular footing!

SO NOW we start with this month's feature story. You already know the title and the author, having taken a gander at the swell cover Bob Jones painted for the story. That's right, we're speaking of Don Wilcox's "The Lavender Vine of Death." This is one of those entertaining Wilcox fantasies of alien life and other worlds. You'll meet a strange creature known as "the frog-boy" and above all, a weird intelligence known only as "the lavender vine." We're not going to spoil the novel for you by telling you much more about the story. You'll want to find that out for yourself. All we'll say is that Don has come through again with a swell yarn!

BILL McGIVERN returns this month with an entertaining short entitled, "Dark Wish." Bill is one of those writers who can take two people and put them in a strange set of circumstances and keep you reading with your tongue licking your lips for more. Anyway, that's how we felt when we started "Dark Wish." And we'll bet you'll feel the same way!

"HILDY Finds His Wings" is H. B. Hickey's contribution this month. And a swell offering it is. The story concerns an angel sent down to Earth on a very important mission. But this angel had the fortune—or misfortune, depending on the way you look at it, to see a beautiful girl, and he—well, that's what makes the story, so we stop right here . . .

BERKELEY Livingston walked in a short time back and laid a manuscript on our desk. "I think I've got a good idea in this yarn," he said. Well, since Berk can usually call his shots on ideas we didn't say anything. Instead we read the yarn, and then we had to agree with him. "The Key" is a strange tale about an equally strange house. A house with eight rooms—all of them open except one. The eighth room was a very special sort of room, and to get inside it you had to have a special kind of key. Then, once you were inside it you regretted it, because—Nearly spilled the beans that time. Now that we've whetted your appetite you can start reading . . .

GERALD Vance hasn't been around for quite a long time. Too long a time, we'd say. But he makes up for his absence with an unusual story this month entitled "Reggie and the Vampire." You'll meet a quaint character known as Reggie van Mellowpate III. Reggie was so dumb he thought an Eskimo was an ice cream bar. (Maybe he wasn't so dumb!) Anyway, Reggie, for all his scarcity of marbles, had a peculiar way of getting things done his way. So when he met the vampire and signed his life away, it wasn't at all surprising to Reggie to find that—Hold everything, not a word more! We'd just like to add that we got a terrific kick out of this yarn, and many a laugh. So we're glad to welcome Gerald Vance back into the fold. We'll bet you'll feel the same way.

FINISHING up this month we've got a real treat for you. All of you old-time FA fans will remember Freddie Funk and his hilarious adventures. Well, Leroy Yerxa, the famed FA creator of Freddie Funk passed away in 1946, and we thought, so had his incomparable Freddie. But not so! Leroy's wife, Frances, who has shown that she can write a very good fantasy, decided, (after much prompting on our part) to try a new Freddie Funk story. You'll find it on page 130, entitled "Freddie Funk's Flippant Fairies." We're mighty pleased that Frances was able to turn out such a swell story in the true Leroy Yerxa tradition. And we're also proud of the fact that we had some small hand in furthering the adventures of one of FA's most popular character series.

WHICH about winds up shop for this month. But we'll be back next month with a terrific lineup of stories by your favorite writers. So start haunting your newsstand! .....WLH

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TAKE A NUMBER FROM...

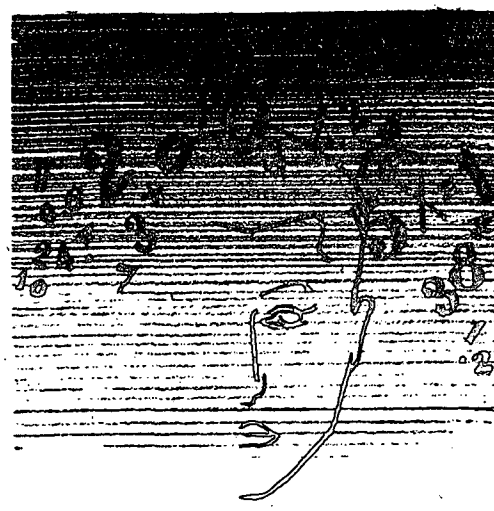
★ By Charles Recour ★

THERE is one facet of human activity that science stays away from in spite of the close relationship between it and the subject. That is the matter of calculating prodigies. Every now and then, newspapers call attention to the fact that down in the Ozarks there is a young fellow by the name of Joe Blow who can do incredible things with numbers *in his head*—with no need to refer to pencil and paper. A brief stir is created and his feats of calculation are played up for a while. Then mysteriously the matter is forgotten and Joe Blow is rarely heard of. Perhaps he ends up in a carnival or a circus, but for some reason he never seems to get very far.

This is not rare. All through the history of science and mathematics, these calculating prodigies have appeared. They are essentially people who have the unusual gift of being able to perform prodigious feats of calculation and reckoning with numbers in their minds and almost instantaneously. For example, one of these people may be asked, "Give the sixth root of ten million and one to seven decimal places!" Within a few seconds the calculating genius delivers the correct answer without even putting down the number on paper. What is more remarkable, he invariably has no idea of how he arrives at the answer. His stock reply is, "I just know it, that's all." Batteries of psychologists and mathematicians have surveyed some of these prodigies in an effort to understand what makes them tick. Without fail, they do not find out. In some obscure fashion something happens within the brains of these people that enables them to work intuitively with numbers—something that no one remotely understands. It is almost as if they heard voices telling them the correct answers although they will not admit this and will deny it always.

These calculating geniuses have been found in every country and in all times. Their ability appears to have little practical value because almost invariably they have no knowledge of mathematics except the most basic arithmetic. Hence they can do little that a machine cannot do except that they can do it faster. And also for an unknown reason, this ability never seems to bring them great riches or happiness. For a while they are the center of attention; then slowly and gradually they pass from sight into very prosaic tasks and jobs. They never make great scientific or mathematical contributions. Occasionally, however, some great mathematician has a little of the ability to do this sort of thing and it aids him in his work. But this is rare, too.

One of the most famous of the calculators was an American boy, Ephraim Dorral. His star sank



as rapidly as it rose, but he made quite a splash for a while in mathematical circles. He was born in 1892 in a small coal mining town in Pennsylvania. He was "discovered" by two company engineers in a company store when he was 14 years old. While waiting to be served by the clerk they were discussing a problem. Dorral was standing nearby also waiting for service. One of the engineers mentioned that he wished he had his slide rule with him so he could compute the value of 1.00047 to the 6.48 power. Without blinking an eyelash, Dorral broke into their conversation with the right answer just like that. The engineers were so astonished that they arranged for interviews to be given the boy. Scientists of the Franklin Institute were called and they questioned Dorral in great detail. They found that he was a true prodigy. He knew nothing of formal mathematics but he could solve any arithmetic problem in his head very rapidly. For some time he was discussed in scientific groups and he was given an opportunity for an education. He became an electrical engineer, but in spite of his unique ability he did nothing of renown. He did his work satisfactorily and his skill with numbers saved him a lot of work, but nowhere did he do anything extraordinary. He lived a happy normal life without ever being able to explain how he did his marvelous feats of calculations.

Dorral followed the typical pattern of all these peculiarly gifted people. For a while they create a stir—then promptly they are forgotten. The historian, Ball, whose book on prodigies is well known says simply, "No one knows why or how."

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by Don Wilcox

From beyond the purple mists in the valley of Karridonza came a weird force, the lavender vine—of death . . .

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FOREWORD

SPACE travelers will tell you all about the great capitols and industrial cities of various planets, among them the skystation of Karridonza. Many will remark upon the beauty of Karridonza, whose alabaster buildings stand white and graceful against the background of the purple mists. But few travelers can tell what lies beyond those purple mists. Very few indeed have ever heard of the "lavender vine" which floats through Karridonza Valley — that airy mysterious **something** whose strange powers over life and death cause even the king to tremble in his dreams. . . .

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CHAPTER I

AS usual, the king was trying to avoid an argument, and the prime minister was doing his best to argue. The king was only thirty-five. The prime minister was fifty. Fifty and smart. Smart and clever and stubborn. It was easier to let him have his way and be done with it.

"The earth girl is walking out on us," the prime minister was saying. "She's sore. She thinks we shouldn't have slaves. We beat them too much, she says. So she's all packed to go. We can't keep her."

The king shrugged and started to speak, but the prime minister beat him to it.

"My idea is this," said the prime minister. "Just for the irony, we'll use a slave to pilot her across to the skystation."

The king waved his hand irritably. "Haven't I already said yes?"

"Six times."

"I'll say it ten times if you like. Go ahead. Use a slave."

"You're quite sure—"

"Yes!" The king rose and walked to the window. He pretended to be absorbed in watching the storm clouds gather over the valley.

Prime Minister Nitticello followed him. "I don't think you agree with me, King Arvo. You're afraid a slave will run away with the air spinner. Not likely. Not when we punish runaways with death. Or maybe you're afraid that he would try to make love to the earth girl instead of taking her safely to the skystation. Is that it? Ah-ha!"

King Arvo winced. He didn't care to discuss his feelings for the girl.

"There's a heavy rain coming," he said gloomily.

Prime Minister Nitticello said he would beat the storm. He would drive down into the valley and pick up a slave at once. "I'll pick up the ugliest, scrawniest specimen I can find—one that no slave master will ever miss."

King Arvo loked at him suspiciously. What did he mean? The king could never tell what schemes filled Nitticello's mind. All right, let him go. Anything to have a little peace and quiet.

"I'll go at once, with your consent —your majesty."

Your majesty! Mock politeness! King Arvo watched him as he walked down the steps to the plaza and called for his car. It was miserable, King Arvo thought, being under the thumb of that crafty old diplomat. Small but mighty. Nitticello was more than a head shorter than King Arvo; he was a wrinkled, wiry man with a powerful voice and troublesome will.

"But I'm not afraid of him," King Arvo told himself. "I ought to override him every day, just for the exercise. Why do I keep yielding to him? . . . H-m-m. . . . I wonder if the girl from the earth noticed it."

For the thousandth time King Arvo vowed he would break this invisible bondage.

Nitticello looked back with a knowing glint, and Arvo wondered if his own secret thoughts had been guessed.

Nitticello beckoned.

"Come along. The fresh air will do you good."

King Arvo drew a painful breath. Here it was again—Nitticello's deft suggestion. Fresh air? Yes, the king thought, he did need the fresh air.

He walked down the steps and crossed the plaza as the car drew up. Nitticello got in and he followed.

As the car drove away, the earth girl watched from her room.

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MARCIA Melinda was a long way from home. This morning the earth seemed farther away than ever, somehow. A storm had advanced across the valley and she could no longer see the purple mists. Somewhere a hundred miles or more across the way was the skystation of Karridonza. Late this afternoon a space ship would take off. Would she be aboard? Was she going to walk out on this country without accomplishing anything?

"You're all packed, Miss Melinda," the lady-in-waiting said, coming over to the window. "Can you see them, Miss? I'll get you some field glasses."

The lady-in-waiting referred to the court car, evidently. Marcia knew that the prime minister and the king had quarreled over something. Something about her passage to the skystation. Now they had taken a quick ride down into the valley, but the storm was closing in on them. They stopped, turned around, and started back by way of a short cut up the slope.

The lady-in-waiting re-entered and handed her a pair of binoculars.

"Thank you. Do you know where they were going?"

"We had our ears to the door, Miss. The prime minister said he was going to pick up the meanest slave he could find."

"A slave? Why?"

The lady - in - waiting shrugged. "For spite, I guess. He's going to have a slave pilot you to the skystation."

Marcia's binoculars came to a focus upon a lonely figure trudging along the road. The rain was descending now, but he couldn't be bothered. He was apparently coming to the king's fortress. He was a slave, naked to the waist like all slaves, wearing the brown belt and dun-colored trunk of the laborer in servitude. Marcia believed that he must be one of the earth men rumored to be among the Karridonza prisoners. A little tremble of anxiety went through her.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, and he walked with a purpose. If he had been a native, he would have worn a high narrow mane of hair straight back over the center of his head. That was the Karridonzan style

For a moment Marcia couldn't help wondering what might happen if an American slave were assigned to pilot her to the air spinner across to the skystation.

She watched with a tremble of excitement as the car approached the pedestrian. There was another figure down there, too—something that came up out of the marsh. It looked like a child—or was it a huge frog?

Now the rains were beating down and presently the slave, frog, the car and the entire valley scene were swallowed up in the gray downpour.

CHAPTER II

JUST before the rain struck, Joe Peterson heard a familiar voice calling to him from the side of the road.

"Hi, there, slave. Don't you know enough to come in out of the rain?"

Joe looked around but failed to see the source of the voice. "Where are you?"

"Right down here in the marshes." It was Pudgy, as Joe had guessed. Half boy, half frog. Always popping up where you least expected him. Always laughing. Always looking bright and mischievous, with his sparkling green eyes as large as silver dollars, and a shiny green pair of legs with webbed feet.

"What are you doing here?" Joe

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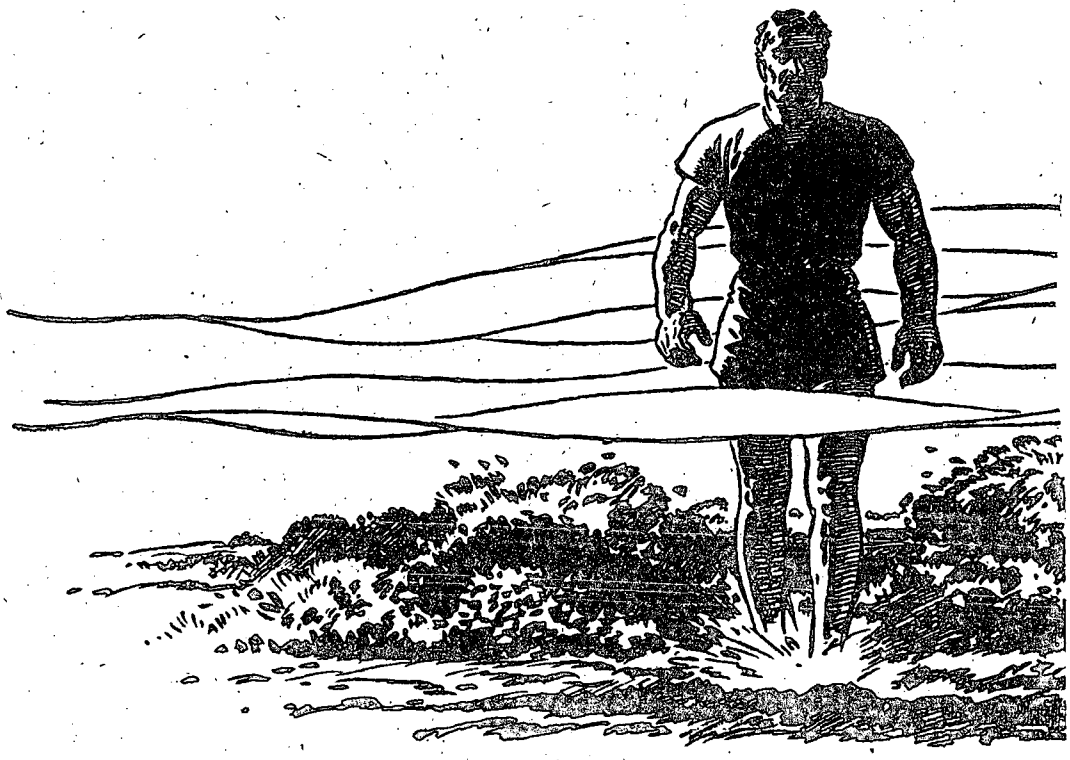

Peterson asked.

"I thought you looked lonesome. But you're going to have company. Guess who? The king!"

"I'm on my way to see the king," Joe said.

"The king's on his way to see you." The frog boy gave Joe a wink. Then he turned his funny face to the cloud and opened his red mouth to catch the first big raindrops. He splashed along the marshy way chuckling contentedly. "The king," he repeated, gesturing over his froglike shoulder. Then with a splash, he ducked under.

Through the sudden downpour Joe looked back to see the car that was almost upon him. It was sliding dizzily around the slick road. It came to an abrupt stop beside Joe.

The two important looking Karridonzan officials in the rear were shouting at the chauffeur, who was having a bad time of it, trying to satisfy both of them. Now the older of the two lowered a window and called to Joe.

"Slave! What are you doing out here alone? Running away?"

Joe made a proper bow. He brushed the streaming rain from his face and came nearer.

"Sir, I'm on the way to interview the king."

The older man gave a sarcastic laugh. "Isn't that nice? The king will be real happy. I'll bet you're one of his old playmates."

The younger man, whom Joe guessed to be King Arvo himself, wasn't impressed by his companion's joke. "What business could you possibly have with the king?"

The older man interrupted before Joe could answer. "He has no business. He's probably an assassin."

Joe meant to stand his ground. By

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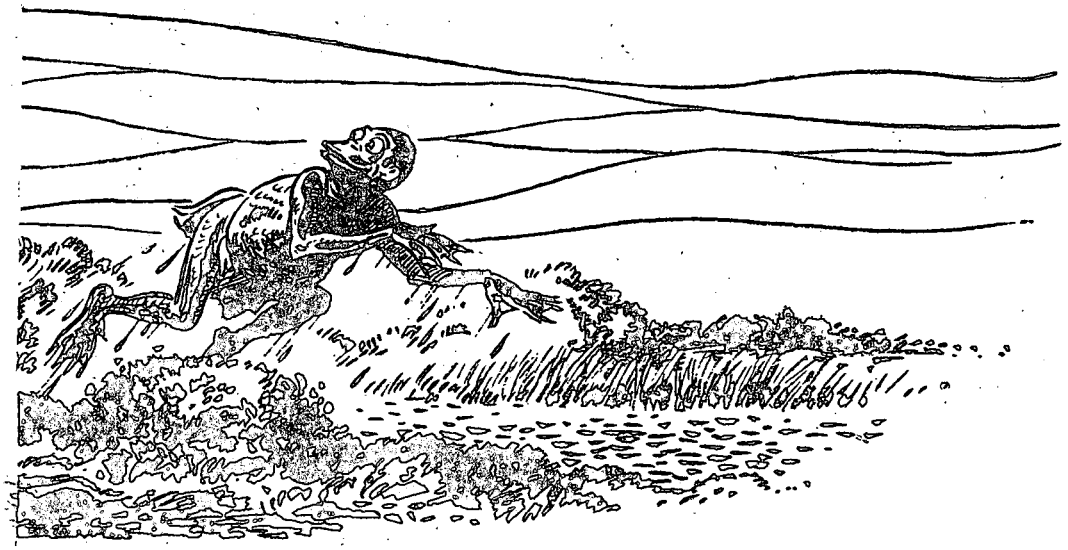
Joe Peterson sloshed through the marsh while ahead of him, jumping with swift movements, Pudgy, the frog-boy led him toward the dread palace of King Arvo . . .



a twist of fate he had been shanghied from the earth and sold to a Karridonzan slave trader many months ago. He had taken his share of physical beatings but he had never been beaten in spirit. At last he had been entrusted with a day of freedom, and he was determined to see the king. He meant to present his case, and demand in the name of justice and interplanetary good-will, that he be allowed to return to the earth.

Now the surly words of the king's companion incensed him. But he wasn't going to let any rash answers upset his plans.

He bowed as courteously as he could, and addressed the younger man confidently.

"Your majesty—"

"So you recognize me!" The king gave a start. "How did you know?"

"I was told you were coming this way."

"You were told? No one knew I was coming. I didn't know it myself until a minute ago."

"Your majesty, may I have an appointment to explain to you—"

The older man barked an order to the chauffeur and the car plunged ahead. Joe was left standing in a spray of flying mud.

Pudgy hopped up out of the marshy waters.

"Congratulations, slave. You've had an interview with the king."

THE rain roared down heavier than ever and great blasts of thunder pounded through the hillsides. The car had disappeared from view. Joe trudged on, low in spirits.

It was the thunder, he thought. Lightning and thunder always reminded him of his troubles back home. It had stormed that night when they clamped him in jail over a labor

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squabble. He had been a laborer, and a damned good one. He'd never thrown himself into an unjust strike in his life. But some personal enemy had seen a chance to put him through the mill. One swift surprise move and Joe found himself in jail. And that night the storm had struck. The thunder roared and Joe roared back at it. He was innocent, and by the heavens he would prove it!

Pudgy was now hopping along beside him, feeling very good over the falling weather.

"What's the matter, slave? Afraid of the thunder? Oh, I know. You're telling yourself that old story about how you got into this mess. I've heard that one before."

"The door of my prison opened and someone pretending to be a good angel, told me it was time to come out," Joe muttered. "I thought everything had been cleared. But the next thing I knew I was being loaded onto a space ship. They brought me up to this God forsaken planet and sold me to the Karridonza prison."

"Just like the rain," Pudgy cackled. "Spatter, spatter, spatter. The same tune over and over again."

"That doesn't make it any less true."

But Joe knew that his protests of innocence had become hollow words. And now, after this roadside clash with the king, how could he hope to win?

"Keep walking," Pudgy said. Then with a gay laugh, that froglike monstrosity hopped back to the marsh. He dived in, his green webbed feet flying after him.

Joe had lost one of his sandals in the mud and was looking for it when he heard the call of the chauffeur. The car had stalled a few feet ahead of him. They needed help.

"Hurry up, you damned slave. Put your shoulder to the wheel and get us out of here."

CHAPTER III

JOE had played in luck. His muscles had turned the trick. He was a prisoner: for convenience they had put him in a waiting room cage temporarily; but at least he was here. The warm glow of the palace lights shone down upon him. He was still caked with mud from head to foot for he had helped push the car all the way back to the main highway. What he wouldn't have given for a good shower! A drink of water would help, too. You'd think they'd be more thoughtful in a king's palace. No service. And he'd better not risk rapping on the bars.

He thought of Pudgy. He looked to the marble pillars along the corridor—the very sort of hiding place that Pudgy would choose. He gave a low whisper.

"Pudgy . . . . ! Pudgy!"

One of the orange-sashed guards, standing like a statue against the wall turned a cold eye in Joe's direction. Joe gulped, fell silent, and settled back against the bars to wait. Then he came up with a start.

"Holy c o m e t s ! Am I seeing things?"

It might have been a dream but it wasn't. It was a girl. And when Joe Peterson said the word **girl** to himself, he wasn't referring to just any female from Mars or Venus or Mercury. Here was an **earth girl**—the rarest of all creatures in Karridonza. She was darned attractive, he thought. Maybe not what you'd call pretty. Not a painted doll type, but a keen looking person who would make the most important travelers on any space ship sit up and take notice.

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She was dressed for space travel. From her attitude, Joe guessed that she had every intention of boarding the earthbound sky ship that would leave this very afternoon. She crossed to the table where her baggage had been assembled. She checked each item, barely nodding to the officious prime minister as he came toward her smiling.

"You've not changed your mind, Miss Melinda?"

"No, thank you. I'll go at once. Is my transportation ready?"

Joe thought that her face brightened a little at the sight of the king. He was bringing her a gift—an ivory jewel box. It was pretty elegant, the way he opened it and handed it to her with a slight bow.

"These treasures are for you, Miss Melinda. I hope you will not forget—" The king paused as if to suggest many things that could not be enumerated. "I'm sure you will not forget—"

The girl was shaking her head. "No gifts, please, your majesty. After all, you and I are parting as friendly enemies. My requests have only troubled you."

"You can't call yourself an enemy," the king said. "No enemies ever leave this palace alive. This is a gift of friendship."

He was forcing her to accept, Joe thought. Joe was puzzled, trying to determine the degree of sincerity back of this farewell. For now the prime minister was also bestowing gifts—obviously the finest of jewels from his personal treasury.

"We have failed to listen to your entreaties," the prime minister said, rubbing his hands together and smiling unctuously, "but these gems should convince you that you have been our most popular guest."

The air spinner, as the Karridonzan "airplane" was called, taxied onto the plaza. Joe had been fascinated by the stories of its automatic controls. It could find its way back to home base like a homing pigeon.

"You needn't send a pilot with me," the girl was saying. "Can't I cross the mists and let the spinner come back alone?"

"It is a matter of Karridonza courtesy," the prime minister said. "King Arvo has already arranged for one of our slaves to accompany you."

The three of them came over to Joe's cage. For a moment Joe forgot to breathe. Were they going to let him act as escort? What was the game?

THE girl gave a little gasp at the sight of him. He must have looked an awful mess. He was unshaven, his hair was uncombed, and he was cloaked in slave garb and mud. He wouldn't blame her if she were frightened at the sight of him.

But when she said, "Oh, the American!" and then pressed her fingers over her lips, he caught the impression that she must have heard of him before.

She was telling him something with her eyes. She was shaking her head, a barely perceptible gesture, as if trying to warn him of some danger.

Nitticello, the sharp-eyed little prime minister, drew the king aside, and for a moment they consulted. Nitticello had perceived something, Joe didn't know what. But whatever it was, he got a nod of agreement from the young king. In that moment, Joe new, the plan had been changed.

"We've decided to let you go alone after all, Miss Melinda," King Arvo said. "Are you quite sure you won't need a pilot's company?"

"On second thought," the girl said,

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"I believe I do. If it's the rule—Karridonza courtesy and all that—and if this person can be spared—"

The prime minister shook his head. "No, Miss Melinda. We prefer to respect your original wish to go alone. Our very best wishes will go with you."

And that was that. All except the farewell kisses.

It must have been the king's puzzled and forlorn look that softened the girl's heart at the last moment. She leaned toward him and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Then she turned hastily, and started to walk past the prime minister.

But Nitticello caught her hand. "I also respect your noble earth customs. Do you have only one goodbye kiss to spare?"

The girl drew back, then yielded on impulse and kissed him lightly on the forehead. Joe saw one of the orange-sashed guards step forward with a cocky twinkle in his eye.

"Everything comes in threes, Miss." And he reached toward her.

Then to Joe's surprise, she whirled about and said, "The third kiss is for your prisoner here."

She stepped to Joe's cage, reached through the bars to touch his whiskered cheeks lightly with her hands, and kissed him on the lips.

When the air spinner had roared away, two minutes later, Joe was still sitting dreamily wondering what had struck him.

He looked out at the gray rain, now beating down steadily over the marble plaza, and he wondered whether there would ever be another kiss like that—ever—anywhere in the whole solar system.

And suddenly he became alert with a feeling of terror. What was it the prime minister had just said to the king?

"You don't think I meant to let all of our finest gems slip out of our hands, do you?"

What did he mean by that? The girl had gone. She had flown off into the opaque clouds.

"Of course she'll not get back to the earth with them." Nitticello was snarling and there was a murderous light in his eyes. **"She'll never get to the Karridonza skystation!"**

And even as the little prime minister enunciated these brittle words he was whirling the cranks of the black machine at one of the circular windows. Joe saw the shiny cannon-shaped barrel of the instrument lift to an angle that might have been calculated to shoot a blast of fire through the rain clouds. Now he was letting automatic instruments adjust it to some unseen target.

The king was too confused to do anything. He was trying to make the older man stop and explain.

"You can't do that, Nitti!"

Nitticello grated through his set teeth. "How do you think I've preserved the riches of this kingdom for you all through these years? By giving away our finest gifts? This ray will do the trick in a minute. It will nip a wing off. The spinner will fall. The jewels won't be harmed. And we know how to pick them up, don't we?"

"But the girl!"

"She had her chance to work with us. Peace be to her mangled bones."

The realization hit Joe like a bolt of lightning. He tore at the bars of his cage, sprung one of them and forced it out of its socket. He wrenched at another. It bent. That was all he needed. He thrust his head and shoulders through the opening, he writhed like an eel, and then he was out.

He dashed across the corridor. But

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the clank of bars had alarmed a whole bevy of guards into action. They came at him from all directions.

He dodged between two marble pillars. He kicked the first guard out of his path. He ducked back, so that the next two collided. He leaped over the scramble. For an instant the way was clear. He raced toward Nitticello and the black instrument of death.

Was he too late! A silver line blazed like a stream of white fire into the dark clouds. That was death. Death finding its mark through the rain.

The deadly accuracy of instruments. Joe was too late. In his mind he could visualize the air spinner dissolving under the touch of that ray. It was an uncontrolled moment for Joe Peterson, the slave. He had seized a chair and would have flung it at Nitticello's head. But something struck him across the back. He stumbled. Then the guards were pouncing on him from all directions.

They pulled him to his feet. He fell again. They couldn't make him walk so they dragged him by the feet and dumped him in one corner of the reception room. Then they stood by, with weapons ready, as if just daring him to start anything.

CHAPTER IV

JOE Peterson was in no condition to start anything. The one deeply burning hurt over the lost earth girl was all the pain he could stand. His injured back and his bruised arms and head were nothing. It was the girl —that lovely, friendly person who had kissed him only a few minutes ago.

Weakly he looked past the guards trying to see what might have happened to the king.

"Could I talk with the king?" he muttered through his swollen lips.

"The king will talk with you when he gets around to it, you damned slave," one of the guards said. "He'll read you order number thirty-three. And we'll have the pleasure of carrying it out."

Joe watched in silence. He was seeking the king in a strange light. The king was hunched down in a chair, drumming his fingers nervously on the table. He was eying Nitticello like an anguished son who would like to give his father a lecture if he only dared.

King Arvo will fire Nitticello for this, Joe thought — if he's strong enough.

But Nitticello stared the king down.

"I did it for you and the kingdom, Arvo. I'm always looking out for your best interests. Every hour of every day. That's why we're growing rich instead of poor."

Nitticello glanced around. The orange-sashed guards stood stiffly as if they weren't hearing a word. Nitti lowered his voice and talked earnestly for several minutes. The king didn't like what he was saying.

"Riches!" The king groaned like a wounded beast.

"Riches — yes. And friendships, too. Look! We have this paper—Miss Melinda's own handwriting."

He waved a piece of parchment. Joe understood that the girl had signed a document of friendship for the Karridonzans' future use. Those last minute gifts had apparently won her over. This would clear them from any suspicion of blame for her crash.

The poor, confused king! Joe saw that everything had happened too fast for him. If ray-gunning the air spinner and killing the girl were all for the good of the kingdom. Arvo was go-

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ing to try to see it in the best light. But he didn't like it.

"Why didn't we send a slave with her?" the king asked. "At first you insisted. Then at the very last minute you changed."

Nitticello lifted an eyebrow, and Joe guessed he was debating whether he should reveal his change of motives. "It would have been a neat stroke of irony if we had caused a slave to die with her."

"But you changed the plan."

"We."

"All right, we. We sent her alone."

The wrinkles around Nitticello's lips tightened. He was squirming. "At the last minute it appeared that our chosen slave might be too valuable to be shot down."

"Valuable? We have thousands of slaves," the king protested.

"This fellow is quite husky. Think how he helped us out of the mud. He's strong. Well-built. He's alert and willing. Just the man we need as an example for the other slaves."

The king wasn't satisfied with the explanation, Joe was sure. But the crafty prime minister turned the subject.

"Don't worry about the jewels, Arvo. Don't worry about them." He was speaking in a low voice, and Joe doubted whether any of the guards heard. **"Tonight you and I will go below. Tonight—"** a tense whisper — **"the lavender vine will work for us."**

CHAPTER V

NITTICELLO sat at the table, his hands clenched tight. His half-closed eyes followed every action of the king. Their conference had come to an end.

Outside the windows the rain was beating down mercilessly. King Arvo might have been walking through the storm insensible. He moved down the corridor slowly and entered one of his private chambers.

Nitticello watched him out of sight. Then he rose, walked to one of the arched doorways, and beckoned to someone.

In a moment a huge guard strode up to await orders. He was dressed in a more elaborate black and orange uniform than the other guards—"Sashes" as they were called. This, Joe learned, was Stobber, the chief of the Sashes. The wide flowing orange sash which draped over his shoulder and around his waist was adorned with circles of emeralds, so that his approach was announced by the glittering green flashes from his thick swaggering shoulders.

Joe was fascinated by the roached mane of hair over the crest of Stobber's head—a weird blend of green and orange—doubtless dyed to match his uniform.

"Stobber," Nitticello said. "I have a delicate assignment. For all I know, this visiting slave may be a bloody assassin. We picked him up on the road. He said his master had given him leave to come. He's originally from another planet. He must be one of our prison pickups. Assign six of your best Sashes to me as personal bodyguards until further notice."

They brought Joe a basin of water and some clean clothes. Nitticello stopped him, however, just as he started to wash.

"Wait," Nitticello said. He asked the six guards to station themselves outside the room. Then he turned to Joe. "I like the looks of that mud on your face."

"Do you?" Joe folded his arms.

"It's not quite right. But it isn't bad." Nitticello cocked his head this

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way and that. "I noticed something very interesting about your face soon after you arrived. That's why I didn't let you go with the girl. I can use you. This is the best piece of luck I've had in years."

Joe studied his face in the mirror, and suddenly he knew what the prime minister was talking about. He resembled the king.

He wasn't groomed like the king, by any manner or means. But he had the king's face, feature for feature, from his high forehead, wide dark eyebrows and clear blue eyes to his well-molded chin and full muscled neck. The same straight, prominent nose, the same high angular cheekbones.

Nitticello, disregarding Joe's own unshaven stubble, was plastering a dab of mud on Joe's upper lip in the shape of the king's thin drooping black mustache. He added a small spade-shaped beard. Then he stepped back to study the effect. He smiled — a slightly twisted smile.

He pinned Joe's shock of hair into a single thick upright wing. He was definitely pleased. He became talkative, trying to win Joe over with a quick show of friendship. Joe didn't like it.

"The people would never know," Nitticello said. "If we dressed you up. You'd be a perfect double for the king. That's our little secret, slave. Do you understand me, slave?"

"I heard what you said." The pent-up anger was tight in Joe's throat.

"What's your name, slave? You have a name, haven't you?"

"A number."

"No name?"

"Why should I want a name? The girl had a name, didn't she? And look what happened to her."

"Don't be so gloomy. You're alive, aren't you? You should be thankful we didn't let you fly off in the air spinner, too. It's too bad that she has had a little accident—yes, very unfortunate."

Joe's fist shot out. He did it before he thought. A short hard punch. Thud!

The prime minister caught it on the jaw. He bounced back, stumbled and fell. The sound echoed to the corridor.

Instantly six guards were in the room helping the fallen man pick himself up, demanding to know what had happened.

Joe smeared the mud from his face, untangled his hair, and stepped back. He tightened his fists and waited for the worse. But the worst didn't come. Nitticello was looking at him curiously and for some strange reason he turned it off as nothing.

"N o t h i n g happened," Nitticello said. "Just a touch of dizziness. Probably from driving in the storm. Er—back to your places, Sashes. I'll call you if I need you."

Joe gulped. Heavy thunder was rolling over the valley, and if he had been alone he might have indulged in reflections of his own innocence. But just now, with the strange fire of Nitticello's eyes drilling him, he didn't even want to be innocent. He wanted to tear Nitticello to bits.

"Bathe and put on your clean slave rags," Nitticello said. "There's a basement room waiting for you. When you feel friendly, call for me. I think we can do business."

CHAPTER VI

SLAVE. . . Slave. . . Are you there?"

"Pudgy!" Joe peered into the darkness. He couldn't even see outlines of

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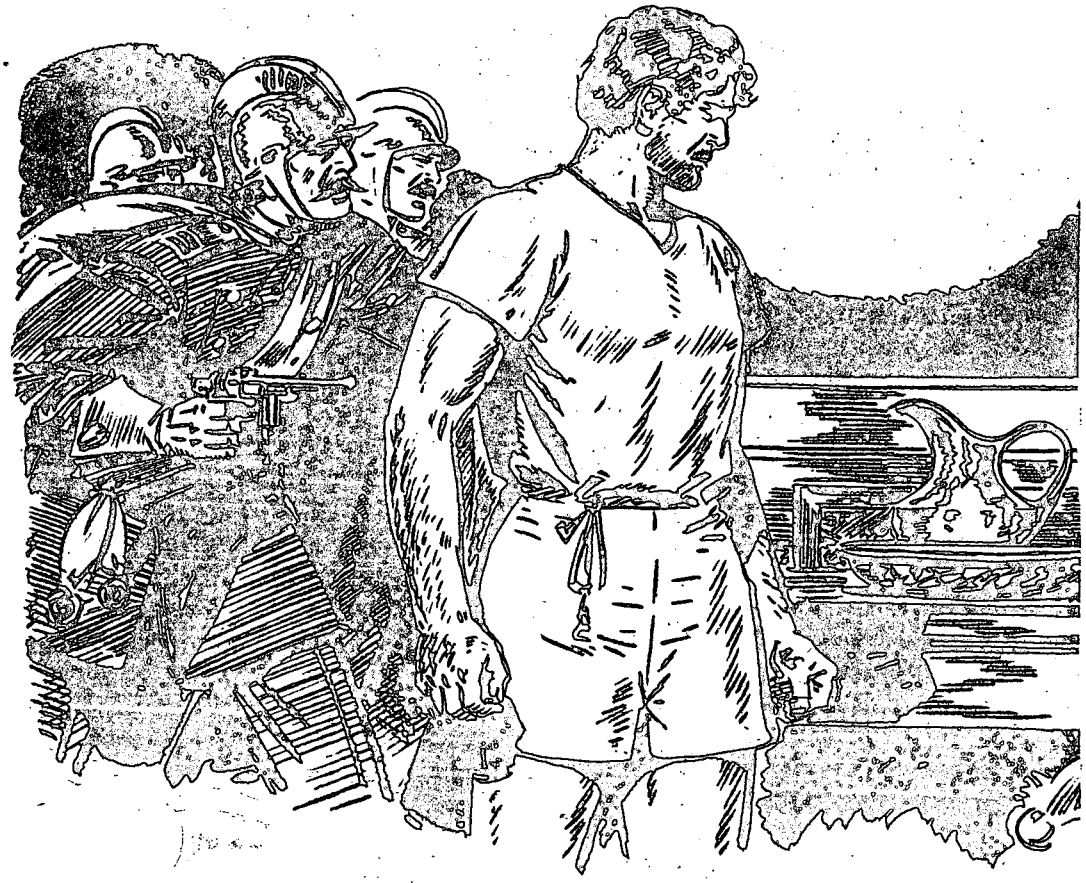

the stone walls in this basement room. He strained at his chains. They had taken no chance with him this time but had shackled him in irons.

"Sh-sh, don't be rattling around. I'm coming."

Pudgy's voice was close and intimate, as if he were right at Joe's ear. "What have they done? Bolted you down solid?"

"My ankles," Joe whispered. "They had a funny notion that I might walk out on them, I guess. But my hands are free. If you could bring me a file—"

"Not so fast, slave. Maybe I didn't come to release you."

"Oh, just a friendly visit? Now isn't that cozy?"

"Stop your growling, slave. Do you know what is going on around this place?"

"Plenty. After what I've seen this afternoon, you can't surprise me with anything."

"Oh, can't I?" There was mischief and intrigue in the frog-boy's voice. "I'll see about that. Stay right where you are till I get back."

"Where are you going?"

"There's a convention of frogs in the marsh." Pudgy gave a weird little laugh.

"Stop it! Where are you going?"

"Past the king's window. Things are buzzing in his brain. Buzzing reminds me of flies and flies remind me of dinner—"

"Are you going to eavesdrop on the king?"

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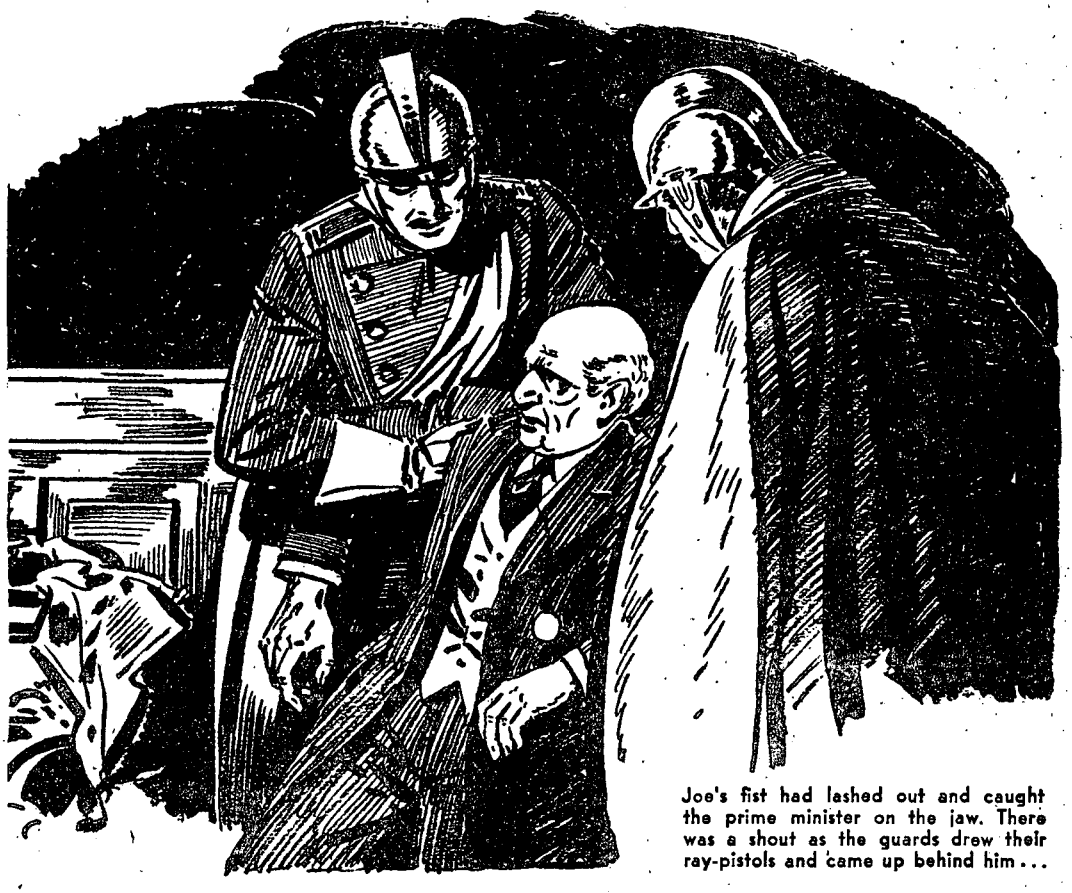

Joe's fist had lashed out and caught the prime minister on the jaw. There was a shout as the guards drew their ray-pistols and came up behind him...

"Exactly. But I'll be back. Don't go away."

King Arvo Arvadello sat in his executive room, brooding. The rain had ceased. The deep darkness of night had come over the valley. He was alone.

He toyed with the heap of papers on his black marble desk. Troubles, troubles! It was an old story, he thought—a kingdom on the ragged edge of ruin; a young ruler who had no stomach for his job; and a crafty old adviser who was bleeding the kingdom for personal gain.

He glanced at the papers. Riots. Three slave owners at Redroot Hill had been murdered. The countryside was seething.

What had been done about it? Arvo shuffled the papers until he found Nitticello's report.

"Fifty more Sashes sent to Redroot Hill to restore order.—Nitti."

Fifty Sashes. . .Would that throw a scare into a thousand rebellious slaves? Or just antagonize them?

A later report: "Seventeen slaves beaten near Redroot Hill. Ten reported dead." Yes, the Sashes had gone to work.

To this report Nitticello had pencilled a comment, "Excellent. This nips the rebellion in the bud. Redroot officers recommended for special honors.—Nitti."

Nitti had the situation in hand, of course. Nitti was running things, when you came right down to it. And he was lining his own pockets in the

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bargain.

And yet King Arvo knew that without Nitti he would have been at a loss for the answers. Sooner or later he always turned to Nitti for help. Nitti was always there. He had always been there, years before Arvo had become king. That was the trouble.

"Why don't I call him in and tell him that from now on, I'll make the decisions? Why do I keep postponing it?"

Impulsively, King Arvo touched a button. His personal attendant entered.

"Where is Nitticello at the moment?"

"He's out on the plaza, your majesty. He was asking whether you had approved his request for honors for the Redroot officers—"

"Do you have to bring that up? I'm busy." But he had just as well give Nitti his way on that point and get it over with. "All right, tell him to go ahead and grant the honors."

The king fancied he saw a look of pity in the attendant's eyes. Yes, the court must have observed. It was probably common gossip that he was always yielding.

"Do you wish me to turn on the lights?" the attendant asked.

"No, nothing more."

The attendant bowed and left.

It was pitch dark beyond Arvo's open window. He stood there breathing in the moist night air slowly. Honors for the slave-beaters. . . Obstreperous slaves being killed the moment they became troublesome—that was Nitti's policy. There were plenty more to be had, as Nitti always said. And all kinds.

Arvo was presently haunted by thoughts of the earth slave. His superb physique—almost a match for Arvo's own—and his face—something like Arvo's — and his rich, pleasing voice, strong but restrained . . .**How did it feel, being a slave?**

The question wedged into Arvo's consciousness too deeply for comfort.

"Stop sympathizing," he scolded himself. "He's only a miserable muddy slave! Probably a criminal."

The king's thoughts were broken by the appearance of a flaming torch, moving across the plaza. . . .

WHEN Pudgy returned to Joe's basement prison, he reported that the whole court had assembled out on the plaza for a religious observance. The nine torch lanterns had been lighted.

"If you listen you can hear them chanting. You've not heard anything until you've heard Karridonza music. It's even more soulful than a chorus of frogs." Pudgy chortled. "You and I ought to be out there helping them."

"That's why I say. If you will get me a file—"

"But that isn't the real show, slave. It's just a screen. The real show is right down there." The frog boy took Joe's hand and touched it to the stone floor.

Joe mumbled something to indicate his confusion. For all he knew, Pudgy may have been able to see through this stone floor. Those big ghastly green eyes of his—there was no telling what secret powers this curious creature possessed. But whatever the frog boy might mean, Joe was learning to have confidence in him.

"Give me a hand," Pudgy was saying. "I've been in this cell before and I know which rock to work on. It's this one. . . It moves. It lifts—if you have what it takes."

Joe strained at his bonds and followed the boy's directions. The small stones that were wedged between the

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larger blocks of the floor presently loosened and came out. Then Joe applied his strength to the handle-like niches. The stone budged. Together they succeeded in lifting it and setting it to one side.

Joe looked down through the square into a deep, dimly lighted room below.

"Don't breathe," Pudgy said "They'll be here in a moment—Netticello and the king. Listen!"

The source of the light which filtered into the cavernous room must have been moving, for little by little it revealed a series of curving white stone stairways constructed in a fantastic pattern. They formed what appeared to be an immense funnel directly beneath Joe's gaze. Now Joe could see the king and the prime minister as they jogged down these steps. The prime minister was carrying a lantern. They descended one tier of stairs after another, down and down, until they had reached a point about one hundred feet beneath Joe's observation point.

The lantern was extinguished. But there was still a light—one brilliant dot of purple—coming from the very center of that deep funnel. It was a weird, far away glow coming from a point so deep, Joe thought it might have been the very center of the earth.

"Listen," Pudgy said. He took a small rock and tossed it. If it had struck close, the two men would have heard it. But it fell through the near darkness, straight down toward the deep well of purple light.

Joe listened for several seconds. No sound returned.

"Deep," said Pudgy. "Nobody knows how deep unless he rides through on the vine."

Joe had heard many stories of the wonders and dangers of this mysterious phenomenon. The lavender vine! Pudgy seemed to know all about it. The two men were about to call it into action, he said. Joe's pulses quickened.

"What kind of a thing is it? Is it something that belongs to the king?"

"It belongs to no one," Pudgy said. "We belong to it, if anything. It's as wild as the very lightning. No one knows when it will come or what it will bring. Or who'll get killed by it. And not many people know where it sleeps. But I think this is its home, right down there."

"Have you ever seen it?"

"Seen it? I was in it. I'm one of its victims. Did you think that I was born with this monstrous form?"

The words stunned Joe to silence. He had seen so many strange things in this land that he had taken Pudgy for granted. But Pudgy's deepest feelings were betrayed by his low, quavering voice. In this moment he had revealed the secret of his life.

WITHIN the deep curve of the funnel, the king was pronouncing magic words. Joe could hear the mysterious mumblings in a language that was certainly not Karridonzan.

The dot of purple was rising. Like the bulb of a gigantic plant, it was sprouting into a stem. Now it emerged into the wider mouth of the funnel, a twisted trunk of purple light.

The brilliance was increasing. The king and the prime minister began to back away from it, keeping a close eye on it as they ascended a few steps. From deep purple it was changing into something brighter. Soon it was as luminous as an electric arc. A brilliant lavender.

It was a live thing, Joe thought.

It was extending into branches—the thick, limp arms of a sprangling

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vine. The arms were silky things of light. Whether they were of flowing gases or solid substance Joe couldn't tell.

"Seevia . . . Seevia . . . Seevia."

The king had changed his chant into some sort of command. Pudgy whispered to Joe that the word meant, "creep".

The vine was creeping, branching out into several directions over the walls of the funnel.

Several stems had ranged upward almost high enough to touch the underside of the floor through which they watched, so that Joe momentarily wondered what might happen if he, like Pudgy, were caught within its power.

Pudgy said, "Notice that the king has summoned it. But the prime minister will instruct it."

Joe saw that one branch near the central trunk was curved like the duct of a gigantic "ear" and into this "ear" the prime minister was speaking. He was giving instructions.

"Seevia. . . Seevia. . . Seevia. . " the king's voice droned on ceaselessly.

Pudgy swung down through the opening in the floor and before Joe could detain him, he leaped to the branch of the lavender light which was extending toward the ceiling.

Joe saw the vine bend and twist under the weight of the frog boy. It was like a roll of lavender-colored silk —smooth, flexible and yet with a certain living quality that made it sensitive to every touch.

The two men below did not see Pudgy. The lad stole down as silent as the vine itself. Indeed, Joe was beginning to think of him as a part of this mysterious power. When he had reached the branching arm just above the "ear", he was careful not to be observed. The prime minister was working in earnest—at what, Joe could only guess.

Many minutes later the frog boy ascended to the ceiling. He had carried out his eavesdropping expedition successfully. By taking advantage of the bending and twisting of branches, he found his way back to the opening where Joe waited.

"Nitti is telling the vine to go to the wrecked air spinner." Pudgy was excited over the news. "He tells it to bring back anything of great value that it finds there. See how the tips of the branches are waving. It's working. It's spreading long stems out across the valley. It finds its way through dozens of places. That room you see opens to the cliff beyond the palace. And there are caves straight down that also lead out."

"Can the people out in the valley see it?"

"If we were on top of the palace, we could see it streaming out in several directions."

"Can't you cut me loose from this anchor? I'd give my right arm for a view."

"If you want to sacrifice a leg," Pudgy quipped, "we might chop you loose. But don't be impatient. The real show is here. Just wait. Wait till it brings back those jewels."

So this was the means which Nitticello had in mind when he assured the king that those treasures could be recovered.

"Nitticello was also telling it, 'No flesh. . .No bones'," Pudgy said.

That was the prime minister's concession to the king, Joe thought. The girl's crushed body was never to be seen. The king had simply vetoed that.

"Something's coming up the shaft," Pudgy whispered. "You can tell by the way that main stem is trembling. It's coming—"

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Up through the central trunk, an object was being conveyed. It rose like an immense leaf in a fountain—a light-colored rectangle of some material which Joe couldn't immediately identify—and it slid down through one of the branches and dropped with a thud at the prime minister's feet.

The prime minister and the king jumped back to avoid being struck. The thing had settled solidly, however, and they approached to examine it.

"Why, it's only the wing of the air spinner," Nitticello said audibly. "No, no. This won't do." He was shouting. "Bring what is valuable! Valuable!"

The king resumed his weird antics, gesturing and chanting. "Seevia . . . Seevia. . . Seevia. . "

CHAPTER VII

THE wing of the wrecked air spinner!

It had been sheared clean, like a knife blade. Joe seemed to feel it stab right through his body. The girl — the wreck! The two men were muttering. The prime minister was damning such outrageous luck; and the king, garbling his magic words, showed plainly enough his surprise that the lavender vine had apparently failed. But as Joe watched and listened, his only thought was of Marcia Melinda.

He whispered to Pudgy. "If there's any way to get me out of this cell, I want to go—to her. On my planet we pay respects to the dead. It's the least I can do—for her. Can you help me get loose?"

Pudgy had an idea up his frog-skin sleeve. Again he lowered himself through the floor, holding tight to the edge with his hands. His shiny green legs kicked at the highest tongue of lavender light. His action apparently attracted it, for it waved higher. He kept teasing it as he crawled back to safety. The tip of silky lavender followed him through the opening. It snapped at him like a whip. He guided it across the floor to Joe's chains. It jumped and waved, as flexible as a rope of silk. Pudgy brought it to Joe's ankles. Joe could feel warm air currents as it lashed toward him. A metallic snap!—then a second—and Joe's chains were chopped away clean! Joe, perspiring, rolled back out of reach. For a long moment he and Pudgy huddled in the corner, watching. The lavender vine began to retreat, and presently it was gone.

Together Joe and Pudgy replaced the stone in the floor. They made a quiet exit from the basement room. They ascended a dark stairway to the palace corridors.

"Side exit," Pudgy advised.

With chanting going on in the front and the lavender vine cutting an errant path from the rear, there wasn't much choice. The corridors of the palace were completely empty, fortunately. No guard remained at his post during the torch lantern services.

They reached the side porch; they quietly ascended to the balcony for a better view of the valley.

The lighted lavender path lay in a curious zigzag pattern over hillsides and through groves of trees. As Pudgy remarked, it looked like a fifty mile bolt of lightning that had frozen and fallen across the ground.

"At the farther end of the lavender vine I'll find the body of the American girl," Joe said. "I'm going at once."

"You'd better set your stakes for a long hike, slave. It will take you all night and half of tomorrow."

"Aren't you coming with me?"

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The frog boy might not have heard. The chanting voices from the plaza caused him to edge along in that direction for a view of the torch ritual. He sighed. Certain deep emotions had been stirred in him, Joe thought. For all his froggish appearance there was something very human about him.

They were putting out the torches now, extinguishing one after each stanza of their melancholy song. Joe saw that Pudgy was being drawn into the ritual as if by magic. He had begun to sing to himself, and his bright green eyes were shining intently. He climbed down over a trellis, hopped through a fountain, moved quietly into the red light of the last torch and sat there swaying to the music. He ducked back into the fountain when they came too close, but he was a part of the ritual now, and it wouldn't let him go.

"So long, Pudgy," Joe said under his breath.

Left to his own devices, Joe waited for a flare of faraway lightning that would reveal a few landmarks. It wasn't going to be easy, spotting the point where the lavender vine ended.

An hour later he was hiking through the darkness. A few lights through the valley were constant enough to give him his direction.

A few hours later a pink dawn broke through a striped sky. Horizontal lines of hard blue clouds framed the red sun as it rose above the dark mists of the horizon. Sometime in the night the storm had rolled away. And the mysterious river of lavender light across the valley had folded back into itself and melted away in the blackness.

Morning brought news of five deaths in the valley. The trail of the vine was always marked with tragedy. Terror spread as rapidly as the rumors could fly. The lavender vine! Why had it come again? Where did it come from? Was there any reason that it should choose a trail through the lowlands? Had it chosen its victims with a hand to justice? No one knew.

Every group of peasants or slaves that Joe passed was buzzing with excited talk. Every person felt that he might have been one of the victims. It was hungry lightning on the loose. Well, five victims should satisfy its appetite for awhile.

It was going to be easier than Joe had feared, following the trail to the wrecked plane. Every wisp of conversation he overheard guided him. Occasionally other slaves tried to stop him for questions, when their masters weren't close by. He kept hiking, like a good slave on a cross-crountry errand. For the most part he was able to slip past the masters and the peasants. At the edge of one village he was tempted to stop and talk with a peasant woman who had paused to admire her pretty face in the brook—or was she only adjusting the blue scarf on her head?

Joe resisted the impulse, however. She hadn't seen him. He slipped around the village unnoticed and hurried on his way.

Late that afternoon he came to the end of the trail. The crumpled metal of a wrecked air spinner lay scattered across the hillside. Apparently the wreck had not been discovered. It had occurred within the screen of rain and no one had seen it happen. The muddy rain that had gathered on the pieces after the fall showed no signs of having been touched by human hands.

Where was the body of the girl?

Joe searched the hillside until

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nightfall. It was a vain search. He couldn't understand it. There was no sign of a victim.

Darkness came over him. Tomorrow he would search farther. Exhausted, he fell asleep on the ground.

He was awakened by his own fitful dreams. He was weak and hungry. Perhaps there would be some food among the wreckage. He staggered back and began to putter around in the darkness.

Far away he could see a row of lights that must have been the palace Reddish lights. He counted nine.

"The religious ritual!" he said aloud. "I wonder if Pudgy is singing with them."

Having spoken aloud, he stopped to wonder whether anyone might have heard. Several times he had been pleasantly surprised by the unexpected appearance of Pudgy just when he needed company.

"Pudgy!" he called. "Pudgy!"

There was no answer. The dark valley was all his own, he thought. Nothing but black outlines of hills against the dark mists that bordered the starry sky. A few distant lights—villages or lonely farm homes—and a twisting lavender stream of light!

The lavender vine!

It was creeping along the valley like a narrow ribbon of luminous silk over a landscape of black velvet.

It was coming toward him. Its nearest branch not less than five miles away, and moving rapidly. It was coming toward the air spinner again, of course! It would try again tonight to recover the treasure of gems.

"Pudgy!" Joe's voice sounded tight and scared.

It was coming fast, weaving around the groves of trees, skipping over the tops of rocks. Joe froze in his tracks for a moment fascinated.

A village lay in its path. Strangely, it lifted over the top, like an arched bridge, then struck the ground and skipped, like the path of a skipping stone.

Joe was backing away from the wreckage now. He was suddenly running. It was less than a mile away, and many miles of it were visible. Joe thought of the terrorized people who must be awakening all along the valley from the flare of lavender light in their windows. What persons would be caught within its deadly grip tonight?

The peasant woman? The woman who had stopped to adjust her scarf in the mirror of the brook. Joe couldn't help thinking of her, wondering—

He stumbled and fell. He scrambled to his feet and raced on around the slope. He had better get well out of range. The vine was coming toward the wreckage by the swiftest possible course. He could see the tip end now. That was the "growth bud", he thought. It was less than two hundred yards from him. What a fascinating thing. He slackened his retreat long enough to observe its weird form. The growing end was branched like the delta of a river—or like a bolt of lightning that reaches with a cluster of fingers. The fingers lifted over trees and rocks, touched the ground, and lifted again. Where the fingers went the long twisting zigzag arm followed.

A claw of light, Joe thought. No head or face or eyes, but a claw, like a living thing, feeling its way, racing over the land to find the thing it had been sent to find.

Now it came to the wreckage. The lavender fingers played over the fragments. Nothing moved from the

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ground. Light glinted from pieces of metal and glass. But nothing lifted. It was like some monster musician running his electric fingers over a mute instrument. Nothing moved. Nothing sounded.

Joe was hypnotized by the sight. He wanted to creep closer. If only he knew what Pudgy knew about controling this runaway power!

The lavender vine gave a surprise leap away from the wreckage. Its fingers struck the hillside twice, elongating, jumped furiously through the blackness. They leaped at Joe and caught him. For an instant he felt the tingle of something mildly warm and electrical pulsating through his body. Then the pressure of the lavender claw tightened. A whirl of colored images blinded him and then everything was black and he was devoid of feeling.

CHAPTER VIII

ON the same morning that Joe had watched the red sun rise through the striped clouds, an American girl had walked through the same Karridonzan Valley, wondering what the new day would bring forth. . . .

Marcia Melinda knelt over the pool and studied her reflection carefully. There wasn't much more she could do to disguise herself as a peasant woman. She simply wasn't going to cut her hair Karridonza fashion. No one would know, as long as she wore the dark blue scarf.

A few low white clouds scuffed away into the purple mists beyond the valley. The bright light of day was her enemy today. She mustn't let her identity be discovered. And yet she must get to a village somewhere. Somewhere she would find the right person.

She wondered—would the light of her secret purpose show in her countenance, to give her away? She must avoid meeting people.

What a stormy night it had been. Not one storm but several! That terrifying ride in the air spinner would certainly have been fatal, however, if it hadn't been for the rain. The rain had obscured her from view as soon as she took to the air, and she was able to parachute down at once, unseen by the watchers at the palace.

As if she hadn't known what Nitticello was up to, when all of those elaborate gifts came forth! Making her sign that friendship document. The murder in his eyes had shown too plainly. Her fear had been that the American slave would be allowed to accompany her. And that certainly would have been fatal for him. It had been an inspiration for her to urge them to let him come. That alone was enough to guarantee that Nitticello would not permit it.

"The American. . .I wonder what he's like." She was somewhat astonished to realize how much interest she had taken in him at first sight. The kiss had been a dodge, originally—anything to avoid that arrogant guard. But the tall, well-built American had looked at her so imploringly—and then so gratefully. . . .

She wondered whether he, as an American, was as mystified over Karridonzan ways as she. Had he seen that weird vein of light that crawled through the valley last night? That must have been the lavender vine they talked about. She had heard legends of the deaths it had wrought. She had been less than a mile away from the wrecked air spinner when it appeared. That was one danger she hadn't foreseen.

She couldn't help pondering — did

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someone at the palace hold a control over that phenomenon? It had come from that direction. It might have been sent to overtake her. She glanced at the cloth bag that hung innocently from her arm. She quickened her step.

"They'll soon discover that my body isn't to be found among the wreckage," she thought. "And all the riches they lavished on me shall have vanished." Then the search would be on all over the land, she knew, and her life wouldn't be worth the smallest pearl in her collection.

Before high noon she had talked with the slaves in three different fields along the way. Had they any thoughts of fighting for their freedom?

The answers had been guarded. Was she a member of some organized group? Had she attended any meetings? Did she know what had happened at Rodroot Hill?

"Please believe me," she would reply, "please, place your faith in me. I want to help. I know where to get some rich gifts that can be sold for money."

The slaves were suspicious. But they might be willing to trust her if she would attend their secret meetings.

"As to the gifts, you should take them to the merchant Nadoff when you reach the village," one slave had told her. Others along the way quickly agreed that Nadoff would help. "Yes, Nadoff is the one. He will take you to the right place to sell your treasure."

HER feet were aching, and she was hungry and weary long before she reached the village. She was put to the limits of her ingenuity, dodging the slave masters and travelers along the way, or inventing excuses for her passing conversations with the slaves. At one village she gave the story that she was wandering across the land looking for her lost son who, she thought, had been sold into slavery.

"Your son?" The slave master who had queried her frowned and remarked that she certainly wasn't old enough to be the mother of a grown son. In fact, he doubted, from her accent, whether she was a native Karridonzan. "But you're pretty enough," the slave master had concluded with a meaningful light in his eye. "And if you're straying around homeless, I can find a shelter for you."

She hurried on, drawing her blue scarf tight around her throat. Outside the village she stopped at a brook to darken the rings under her eyes and to add years to her makeup.

Late that afternoon she came to the village where Nadoff lived. She found him to be a round, jolly merchant who could laugh loud enough to make the vases on his shelves ring. He gave her the heartiest of receptions.

"I have something quite private I wish to discuss," she said. "I have some valuable jewels in my possession—the finest you have ever seen."

Nadoff swallowed hard and then burst into an uproar of laughter. "You're joking. What fine jewels do you have?"

"Have you heard that an earth girl has recently visited the king? I am that girl. Yesterday, when I started to leave, the king and the prime minister gave me some gifts of jewels. I'd like to use them to help your oppressed people—the slaves."

Nadoff was suddenly serious. His deep laughter might have been parked

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on the shelf with the vases for the remainder of their discussion. It was obvious that the secret movement of the slaves was close to his heart.

His face darkened with a look of disbelief. He wanted to ask a hundred questions at once, but when she opened the bag and he caught sight of the jewels, he was, for the moment, stunned to silence. He motioned her to follow, and led her into a back room.

"Now we can talk," he said. "Tell me, right from the beginning—"

It wasn't easy for her to cut away the curtains of suspicion. After she had talked with him for an hour, relating her experiences at the palace, he called two friends in, and she repeated her story.

"So you see they are mine," she concluded. "Is it too much risk for you to try to sell them, and use the money as I have suggested?"

Nadoff and the other two men considered. Finally Nadoff said, "Tonight there will be a secret meeting not far from here. Would you like to attend? I must warn you, we never know when we may be discovered by the Sashes, but you seem to be so sincere. . . ."

"I'll be honored to attend," Marica said.

CHAPTER IX

NITTICELLO couldn't get an answer out of the frog boy. He spent the afternoon trying various tortures on the lad—a pleasant way to pass the hours, if one is versed in the arts of inflicting pains upon others. To Nitticello, pleasure was pleasure, and the more he could make some guilty soul shriek, the more he enjoyed himself.

The frog boy had been discovered on the previous night during the latter part of the torch lantern ceremony. One of the Sashes had remembered Pudgy. A nuisance. A little misshapen vagabond who was always getting himself under foot at the gates of the fortress. He had been told many times before to stay away. And here he was, participating in one of the religious rituals as proudly as if he might have been a second cousin to the king.

Whips apparently had little effect upon Pudgy, the prime minister had observed. And the application of hot irons always caused the elusive little fellow to leap out of reach, even though he had been chained. Chains didn't hold Pudgy. He was a slippery, amorphous creature and one could no more bind him than nail down a shadow. But when cornered, he would scream with pain, whether he was being touched or not, and although Nitticello couldn't be sure that the pain was real, the effect was satisfying. However, Nitticello's question about the American slave brought no answer from Pudgy. And in this regard, the ordeal was a failure.

"I've tried everything," the prime minister told the king that evening. "I don't believe that damned frog child knows the answer. The slave has gotten away without leaving a trace."

The king was about to suggest a course of action. As usual, the prime minister beat him to it.

"I suggest, Arvo, that we dispatch some Sashes to scour the country. He can't have gone far on foot. He should be brought back—"

"Oh should he be returned to his master?" the king offered, as if debating his own decision rather than sounding out his adviser.

"He should be brought here," the prime minister said decisively. "The law on that point is plain."

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The merchant's eyes bulged in amazement as the girl opened the cloth and showed him the priceless jewels of the King . . .

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The king said no more. He led the way to the basement cavern. Again the night's chanting had commenced around the lanterns on the plaza. That was the best time to invite the lavender vine—when the rest of the court wouldn't know. Tonight it was Nitti's purpose to complete the unfinished business of recovering the jewels.

King Arvo had come to a turning point. The mental agony of being dominated by this little wrinkled old sadist must be brought to an end. Tonight Arvo would begin. The first matter that came up for a decision would be the starting point. He would make his own decision, and he would force it down Nitti's throat.

Perhaps the drastic action Nitticello had taken against the American girl had brought Arvo's dilemma to a crisis. He had spent a sleepless night of remorse. Remorse and resolution. Remorse for his own indecisiveness. Resolution to break the domination.

Yes, King Arvo was going to rule. And Nitticello was going to obey—or lose his office!

The bluish-white light from the lantern illuminated the cavern beneath the palace. The two men crossed to their usual station. Nitticello was being pessimistic. He doubted whether the king could invoke the lavender vine two nights in succession. Arvo said to himself, "He's challenging me. My powers over the vine are still a mystery to him."

The light was extinguished. All of the king's pent up feelings gave weight to his voice as he went through the hoarsely whispered, "Seevia. . . Seevia. . . Seevia."

He felt a glow of triumph, then, when the trunk of the pinkish blue light began to form out of the blackness, he moved back. Swiftly the strands of silken lavender reached their arms out over the cliff and down into the valley. Nitticello would see. From this hour forward Arvo would prove himself a tower of strength. He flexed his muscles. He thought of the similarly fine physique of the American slave. Power, confidence stubborn determination. Those were the qualities that belonged with a sturdy build and powerful muscles.

NOW Nitticello was trying his powers. He was calling for action. The valuables. The treasure. It would be found near the wrecked spinner. Or in the pocket of some thief who had passed that way. It should be recovered. It should be delivered to this step. Over and over he pronounced his demands.

At last the sprangling branches of the vine began to vibrate. Something was coming.

Arvo stood his ground. Would it be the jewels this time? Was Nitticello's own special demand being answered at last? If so, which of them would reach to pick up the treasure when it fell at their feet?

The lavender vine shook with a mighty wave and deposited its treasure: **a man.**

The fellow dropped limply at King Arvo's feet and lay there not moving.

"The slave! The earth fellow!"

That was all King Arvo could say at the moment. Nitticello stared, moved a step closer, and touched his sandal to the slave's head. The prostrated fellow showed signs of life. The shock of being carried over the miles through the vine had stunned him. His eyes were half open, his lips began to mumble something unintelligible, he was breathing.

Nitti scowled. "We call for a treas-

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ure and we get this. We've missed it again."

"Another disappointment," Arvo said.

"Were you wishing for him instead of the gems?" Nitti asked, and the tone of accusation was in his voice. "Very well, this isn't the worst possible luck."

"What do you mean?" the king asked, for he had sensed that Nitti foresaw some special use for this prisoner.

"I mean—nothing. I was afraid he was gone."

"He'll be gone tomorrow," the king said.

"Gone, where?"

"I'm condemning him to death."

The slave's eyes opened wider. He must have caught the idea. He looked around, evidently realizing that he had returned to his captors.

"Don't do anything rash, Arvo," Nitticello suggested casually. "I think we may find him useful."

King Arvo's jaw tightened. Here it was—the test. Nitticello was trying to take the situation out of his hands.

"The law is plain," King Arvo said, meeting Nitticello's eye. "As the ruler of this kingdom, I hereby condemn this slave to die tomorrow."

Nitticello came back with a quick word of warning. "You'd better keep your eye on him, then. He's vicious. Don't forget that he broke out of irons once. And here we stand unguarded."

Nitticello began to back away. The king was left to visualize what might happen if the prone man should suddenly spring to his feet. It was Arvo's impulse to retreat. But once again he stood solid. And then, as the slave came up on his elbows, Arvo surprised himself by striking the fellow.

One quick blow to the jaw. That was enough.

The slave sank back to the ground and closed his eyes, and he looked to be a very sick man.

King Arvo drew a deep breath of strength. He knew he had surprised Nitticello—that Nitti was eying him wondering what had come over him. But King Arvo simply folded his arms and said, "I'll stand by, Nitti, until you send me a couple of Sashes."

CHAPTER X

JOE was almost too sick to know or care what was going on. He doubted whether even Pudgy would be optimistic under these conditions. His hands were bound behind him, his ankles were fastened securely, an he was imprisoned within a cell of steel bars.

Across the way, Nitticello and Stobber were talking earnestly.

"I've known all along that it would happen sooner or later," Nitticello said. "Last night it happened. The king has done it. Unless I take desperate measures, this is the end."

That was all that Joe heard just then, for he lapsed into a sleep of exhaustion.

Stobber and Nitticello had exchanged guarded confidences before. At times of crisis they knew how to understand each other. Just now Nitti was freely admitting that he had never been quite this desperate before.

"You'll think of something," Stobber said giving him the wink.

"I've thought of it already. It's a two man job. There's only one person in the world I would dare trust, and that's you."

"Go ahead."

"We've got to act fast. Arvo is de-

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termined he's going to execute this man. We have less than two hours."

"It's air tight," Stobber growled. "If you got any notion of saving him, that's out. We've already announced the assembly of officers. They are already gathering in, waiting for the king to march up and read the death sentence."

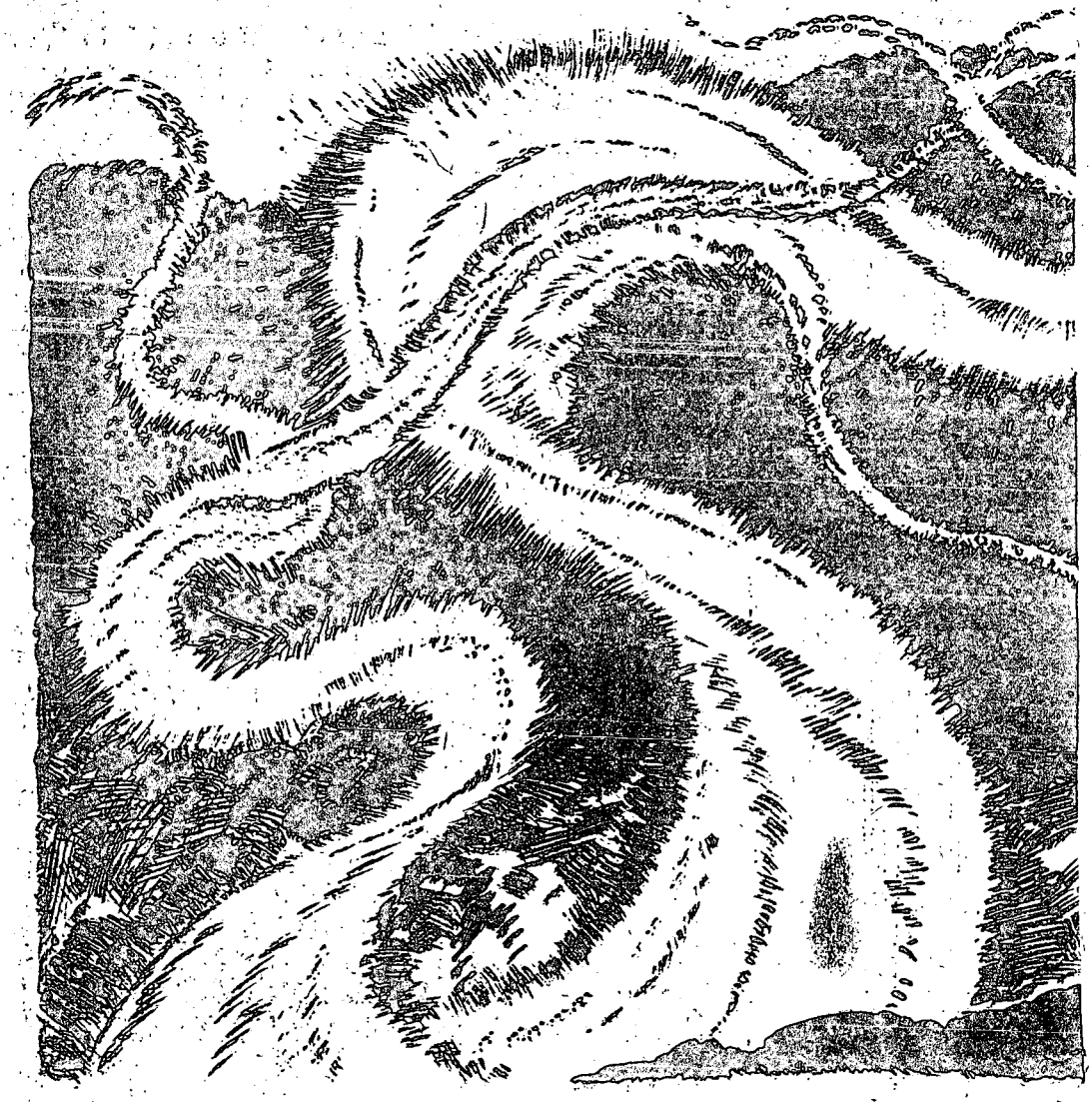
"That's why we've got to step fast. Here's the secret. This slave and the king look alike—so much alike that if you give them both a clean shave and rolled them in a barrel, you couldn't tell which was which. Now do you see—this is our one chance to stay in the saddle."

"You mean—?"

"Make them trade places. Execute the king, by the king's own orders."

Stobber gave an uneasy groan. He didn't think it could work. What about the slave's voice? His manners? How could they be sure that he would behave?

But Nitticello was desperate. The delicate game he played had reached the brink. If King Arvo burst into



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King Arvo and Nitticello stared in amazement as the vine deposited the slave at their feet . . .

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power, Nitti's special shelf of luxuries would fall through.

"Get a shaving outfit, Stobber. Get one of the king's court suits. Don't let anyone see you. I'll get the king."

Five minutes later King Arvo and the prime minister walked up to the cell.

Joe was rousing out of his sleep. A low conversation penetrated his consciousness. The king and Nitti. Nitti was talking nervously. Without opening his eyes Joe listened.

"I tell you, Arvo, you've got to talk with him. I think he knows what happened to the girl. It stands to reason —You see we pulled him back from the wrecked spinner. That must mean that he had some connection with her. Maybe he has hidden the jewels himself."

King Arvo shook his head. "The fellow's half dead. Can't you give him something to wake him up, at least long enough for his execution?"

"Execution — oh, yes!" Nitti appeared to have forgotten this detail. "But after he's gone, we'll never find out—don't you see—we've got to drag this secret out of him first."

They opened the door of the cell and entered. Nitticello produced a hypodermic needle. "Here's something that ought to loosen his tongue."

Joe was thoroughly awake now. The needle jabbed his arm. He was helpless to resist, but he couldn't help wondering what Nitticello had in mind. Nitticello was scheming.

Then Joe looked at the King pityingly, realizing that the poor fellow had been hounded into this situation —this mad determination to have his own way for once.

"Look out!" Joe yelled. Too late he had seen the shadow of Stobber. The husky chief of the Sashes strode in like a cyclone and struck the king across the back of the head before anyone could know what was coming.

The king's knees sagged, he fell. Nitticello had another needle for him. Then the two men went to work, one of them on the king and the other on Joe.

TEN minutes later they had effected a transformation that was nothing short of miraculous, in Joe's opinion. He saw himself in the mirror that they held before him and he would hardly have believed it. He was King Arvo Arvadello, yes, in every detail of appearance except for one thing. They had wrapped a white cloth around his throat. "Remember, king," Stobber was saying sarcastically, "you've got an awful bad cold. You can't talk well. Isn't that right, Nitti?"

"Yes, such a bad cold," said Nitti, "that he can't say a thing except what I tell him to say."

Joe couldn't fail to get the idea. He scrutinized the trim drooping mustache, the small spade-shaped back beard, the richly ornamented blue coat with the gold epaulets, and he knew that the court would accept him.

Then he turned his eyes upon the sorry figure that lay on the floor, garbed in slave's clothes. So that was Arvo—no, it was the Karridonzan version of Joe Peterson.

"He's too white," Nitti was saying, looking at the drugged king. "And he's almost too heavy with sleep. We've got to make sure he performs, at least long enough to go through with his own death sentence."

Stobber gave an evil laugh. "That's irony for you. He got stubborn and insisted, didn't he?

They bronzed the king's chest until he looked as if he had gone through a season of work under the sun. They

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had trouble enough with his hair, making fast the dabs of hair which they had shorn from Joe's head. Joe, observing, felt a loss of earthly pride to be wearing a make-believe Karridonzan mane over his freshly shaved head.

One last detail they could not overlook. They gave their new slave the markings of a black eye—a match for the discoloration which Arvo's fist had bestowed upon Joe's face the night before. Then they slapped Arvo on the cheeks.

"Anything to say before we gag you?"

"He can't talk," said Stobber. "He's too knocked out for that."

But Nitticello took no chances. He fixed a stout gag between Arvo's teeth and bound it with a bandage around his head. Bound hand and foot, the king was carried out of the cell and down the corridor to face his own order for execution.

"All right, your majesty," Nitticello said, turning to Joe. "This is your chance to perform. No slips. I have two extra needles and I'll be right beside you every minute. Do you understand what I'm doing for you?"

"You've saving my life," Joe said.

"Good. I think we understand each other."

CHAPTER XI

THE crowds were gathering at the execution grounds. They promenaded down the sulphur colored walk, dressed in their starchiest holiday clothes. This was a dress-up occasion. For miles around, work had been suspended so that peasants and slave-masters could attend. They came from all directions — public spirited Karridonzans, their manes of hair roached high in keeping with the importance of the event.

The chief topic of gossip, however, was not the execution. Most of the people, whether from the court or from the surrounding region, knew very little about the earth-born slave who was to lose his life. That was nothing to them.

The important thing which made their conversations buzz was the return of the lavender vine.

It had come two nights in succession! The old timers were shaking their heads over the deadly toll it had taken. Twelve more on the second visit. Seventeen persons left dead in its path. Two nights of terror.

What would be done about it? Would the king make any mention of it at today's assembly? Had he any power for dealing with it? Did he know that many people over the kingdom believed that it had come from this very palace within the king's fortress?

"The king should make some statement," people were saying. Or, "Perhaps we can gain a hearing with the prime minister." Or, "We're going to camp right here on the steps of the palace, my family and I, until we know the valley is safe."

And there were more anguished reports that reached Nitti's ears. "Did you hear about our neighbor's little boy? It struck him in his sleep. . . seeped right in through the open window, bounded through his body and on through the wall. . ." ". . .We lost three cattle and a slave. Tomorrow we meant to take them all to the market. . . ."

Nitticello listened, and the chills of uncertainty played through his spine. The lavender vine had always troubled him. It had put those tight wrinkles in his face—worry lines. His sleepless nights had never been

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caused by a conscience full of remorse for his acts of cruelty; they had come from trying to think his way to mastery over the lavender vine. It had got him, mentally. He had never let King Arvo know it, but the thing had beaten him, over and over. After all these years, he had never learned the skill of calling it into play.

And yet the king had possessed this skill!

Well, the king would soon be out of the way, and Nitti would have everything his own way. Yes, as long as he could keep a whip hand over the young American impostor. . .and as long as no one but Stobber ever knew. . . .

"Nitticello, you must make the king do something about the lavender vine." An important townsman confronted him with a savage challenge.

"I'm busy now—"

"See that I have a chance to talk with the king right after the execution. Will you do that?"

"I'll do my best."

NITTI hurried away, mopping the perspiration from his forehead. He shook off requests and demands, right and left. His own complicated piece of engineering must be taken care of before he dared think of anything else.

But at least their obsession with the creeping lavender death had lightened their interest in the execution. In a few minutes it would be over, forgotten. Just one more unruly slave checked off, they would think. And Nitti's path would be clear.

The officers were seating themselves to the left and the right of the execution machine—two banks of seats like a miniature stadium. Seating capacity for not more than six hundred persons. The peasants and some of the townsmen would have to crowd against the fences for their share of the view.

Six hundred persons of importance —officers of the court, slave owners, a few interplanetary tradesmen, captains of the Sashes. . . .

Wealth, Nitti thought, as he glanced over the crowd. The private treasures of gems and precious metals, if they could be squeezed into his own hands, would be enough to buy the Karridonzan skystation and add in to the valley kingdom. And what a monopoly that would be! — what a beautiful funnel for more riches from the passing trade between planets! Nitti's eyes rested on the sulphur-yellow walk, now almost cleared of the hurrying throngs, and for the moment he was seeing a shower of gold before his eyes.

The Sashes took their places in a double line, waiting for the condemned slave to be marched out to the bench. The "king", resplendent in his blue uniform, but apparently troubled by a sore throat, had been waiting in his private station in the center of the execution grounds. Now Nitti marched to this station, ascended the steps, and officially presented the "king."

"Rise and bow," Nitti whispered. The American in the guise of the king rose with dignity, hesitated as if not certain whether he was well enough to be standing on his two feet, then bowed in a satisfactory manner. The crowd rose and saluted him. He returned the salute. The crowd cheered, and he might have returned the cheer, but Nitti touched his arm.

"Enough, enough. Sit down. I'll give you your cues."

Stobber pranced in, followed by a quartet of Sashes surrounding the

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condemned man. The real king would never have been mistaken for anything but a badly beaten slave. Four ropes, wrapped around his half clad body, led to the four Sashes conducting him; each one of them had a secure hitch on him. He was still gagged so that he couldn't utter a word; but no one would have heard him anyway, for now the crowd was getting keyed up and into the spirit of the affair. Everyone shouted, and the clamor went on until the condemned man had seated himself on the bench. . .

JOE Peterson swallowed hard and touched his throat. The wrappings were uncomfortable, and he tried to recall why he must pretend he had a sore throat. The afternoon sun blazed off the yellowish pavement of the execution grounds and burned at his eyes. He was sick. They had drugged him. They had done it so he would cooperate. Yes, he was supposed to yield to Nitticello's every suggestion—that was the price he was paying to save his own life.

Oh, yes, he was the king. That was it. He—Joe Peterson—was the king! Sure, that's what he had to keep in mind. He was supposed to run this damned show right, because everybody thought he was it.

And why was he putting on the show? To execute the real king, of course.

Joe shook his head dizzily. Execute him, why?

"What are we doing this for?" Joe whispered to Nitti.

"Quiet. I'll explain later. Just do as I say."

"But we're about to kill the real king—hell, we don't want to do that. Do we?"

"Shut up."

Joe gulped. The time had come. Joe looked down at the machine. Black and shiny, rather pretty, in fact. Worm gears and little gun-like muzzles and lots of electrical apparatus. And a long jointed blue bar of metal that led right up to the station where he was sitting. It had a red handle. Joe wore a white glove. He wondered if any of the red would come off on the glove.

Nitti had explained something about all that equipment a little while ago. Now Joe tried to recall what he had said. The use of the ray gun principle—that was it. The rays would slice in vertically, acting on a double-spiral control that caused them to move in from each side, like two vertical walls closing in. Only these walls would be invisible, and they would disintegrate whatever they touched.

Disintegrate, that was what Nitti had said. Pretty word, disintegrate. It meant that the victim's body would start melting away from each side. As if it were being sliced away by a knife on each side. Slice, slice, slice. Both sides at once. Shoulders and arms first. Longitudinal sections from the shoulders to the elbows. And gradually the ears, a little at a time, and the jaws. . . .

This was going to be interesting to watch, Joe thought. Only why? Had Nitti explained that, too? Joe asked again, or started to.

"Why did you say—"

"Shut up."

Anyway it was an ingenious machine. It would give both sides of the stadium an equal view of the show all the time, until the very last cross-section of the victim was sliced away.

The time had come. Joe felt the nudge from Nitti. He reached for the lever. This wasn't right, he thought. But who was he to change the rules?

Golly, his hand was limp. He was

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almost too weak to reach.

"Read the sentence first," Nitti was saying, nudging him again.

"Oh, sure. The sentence." He took the paper from Nitti's hand, an edged up to the microphone. He couldn't read a word of the writing, but Nitti had practiced him on saying the speech, and now Nitti prompted him with whispers.

"I, Arvo Arvadello, King of the Karridonzan Valley, do hereby administer the punishment of death to this slave—"

Slave—yes, of course—this should have been for him, only they had switched the costumes.

"—for the high offense of breaking his bonds and escaping from the court prison. May the gods of Karridonza —"

What gods? Would the gods approve a turnabout like this, letting a king die for a slave?

"—witness the justice of my act."

Joe put down the paper, thinking to himself, so this is how it feels to be a king?

THEN his white-gloved hand went to his side, so tight that it was going to take an awfully tough nudge from Nitti this time. It was worse because the eyes of the real king were on him. The real king had been drugged too, Joe thought; but he knew what was happening. And he was looking up with the very same expression Joe would have had if he had been down there, about to be sliced away into nothing.

"Reach for the handle," Nitti whispered.

A sort of breathy o-o-ooh went over the crowd as Joe reached. The gasp seemed to come from all the way back to the crowds at the fence. This was the moment.

"Pull the lever."

Joe shook his head. "There's someone else coming. I'll wait."

"The lever!"

"It's an officer," Joe said. "I'll wait till he comes."

The microphone caught Joe's answer. The crowd turned, and the throngs around the yellow walk made way for one of the high Karridonzan officers who was coming in tardily.

"You're late," Joe shouted through the microphone. Nitti tried to shush him.

The officer called back, saluting, "I am late for a good reason, your majesty."

"Then come up and tell me about it," Joe yelled.

"Now?"

"Now."

Though Nitti was exasperated, there was little he could do, for a royal command was a royal command. The officer came up, bubbling over with enthusiasm. The crowd hushed, trying to hear.

"I've made the most wonderful deal for you, your majesty. You'll raise my salary for this. As your faithful agent, authorized to make purchases with your money, I have just bought a wealth of new gems for your treasury."

The agent opened a beautiful silk and leather purse and revealed to Joe and Nitti the good fortune that was theirs. Joe's eyes widened at the sight. Pearls, rubies, emeralds. Necklaces and tiaras and bracelets and rings—

Nitti gave a gulp that might have choked the microphone.

"You—you bought them?"

"From one of the village merchants. Some peasant lady had offered them for sale—"

"You've paid for them?" Nitti was

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red enough to explode.

"I paid a big price—the king's money, of course—but look at their value. They are a match for the finest you have."

"They are the finest we have!" Nitti roared. "They were **ours—already ours,** you stupid lout! They belonged to us! We gave them—"

Nitti choked off, more from rage, Joe thought, than from the realization that his words were indiscreet. His hands were trembling, and involuntarily he was clutching the open purse.

The shock of all this was enough to make Joe want to walk out on his job. But no, he was the king. His was the power to make decisions. Sure, as long as the crowd **thought** he was the king, what could Nitti do?

Joe leaned to the microphone.

"An important official announcement for all people of Karridonza. Two days ago we gave rich gifts to a visitor from another planet, just as she was leaving. But now we find that the gifts have been sold back to us. We believe she is still in our land, masquerading as a peasant woman. If so, we must find her."

"Yes," Nitti joined in, the anger in his voice barely controlled. "She may be undermining our institutions!"

Joe snatched the microphone away from him. "She may be going around in a daze as a result of an air spinner accident. She departed in an automatic spinner, and it hasn't come back. It must have crashed in the storm—"

"S-s-sh! We'll investigate these matters in due time," Nitti snapped. "Get on with the ceremony."

"And so, ladies and gentlemen of Karridonza, Joe went on, lifting his hand dramatically and pointing to the condemned man on the bench, "we are going to use the surest means in our power to find this earth woman. This slave whom we are about to execute is also from the earth. We need his help. He can be useful as a decoy."

"What are you driving at?" Nitti gasped.

"I hereby declare," Joe sang out to the breathless audience, **"that this man's execution must be postponed!"**

CHAPTER XII

JOE'S command over the sashes was unquestioned. The audience may have been disappointed, but there was not much evidence of it, for everyone was curious over the king's speech about an earth woman masquerading as a peasant. Everyone in the crowd could reflect that he had seen a peasant woman somewhere along the way who **might** have been the mysterious earth visitor in question. And what was it that Nitticello's words had hinted about her undermining the Karridonzan institutions? Upon this point there would be plenty of talk in secret. What a townsman or an interplanetary trader might think about slavery was not a thing to be aired in the king's courtyard.

The condemned man was led back to the palace.

Nitti was white. Chalky white. There was poison in his eyes. His fingers were twitching. He was going to kill someone quick, Joe thought.

He was right at Joe's side as they marched back to the palace. Sashes were all around them, much to Joe's relief. There wasn't a chance for anyone to say anything.

But just wait till that gag is removed from the king's mouth, Joe thought. That would uncork a nice stream of wildfire. No, Nitti couldn't let that happen. He'd either trump up

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a fight or murder the king outright to save his own hide. And Nitti wasn't a man to sell one square inch of his hide. Not while he was doing so well, lining his pockets with precious gems.

What if the court found out? The very thought gave Joe a pounding headache. Nitti would be a dead duck. He knew it, too. You could tell it in his step.

Up the yellow walk in stiff formation, Sashes on either side, the condemned man being forced along at the head of the procession.

Up the steps to the plaza. Past the row of torch lanterns. Through the columns. More marble steps. The palace reception room. . . What were all those people waiting for? Conferences with the king, no doubt.

Nitti a dead duck? What about Joe? He was on a powder keg of his own. As an imitation king he had now cooked his own goose. Would Nitti ever trust him again? No, not even if he behaved like a perfect puppet for weeks and weeks. He had shot his wad, saving the king from execution. He'd never have another chance to open his mouth.

And still, temporarily the crown was his. The Sashes didn't know, and as long as they didn't know, they would step lively at his slightest order.

Supper was served. You could tell from the way the kitchen workers walked on tiptoe and gave you the furitive eye, that they knew things weren't right. They must have known that Nitti was white with rage about something. Nitti's tray waited while he ran through his medicines. He was fixing another hypodermic needle.

It was just as well, Joe thought, that the king was pretty thoroughly doped. After another needle Nitti removed the gag from Arvo's mouth, and he was seen to be in a satisfactory condition. Comfortable enough. But too soggy to stick his neck out and start throwing any accusations around. He seemed to know that he had narrowly escaped death, but he thought it was better to sleep than start bragging about it. Much better to sleep than to be king.

Both Stobber and Nitti kept a close eye on the situation; but Joe did what he could to guarantee that they wouldn't run away with things. He ordered two Sashes and a court officer to stand by the "slave" until further notice.

This done, he finished his supper hastily and went out into the reception room to fare some of his troubled subjects.

"Remember your throat," Nitti said to him, practically grinding his teeth into crumbs. "You're in no condition to talk."

"You'd better come along to make sure I don't," Joe said, adjusting his regal uniform. "If you can give them the answers, I'll nod my agreement. Yes?"

"No."

"Then what shall I tell them? If they want the court to help pay someone's funeral expenses because the lavender vine visited them with death, what shall I tell them?"

"You go with him, Stobber," Nitti said. "Make them understand that his throat is bad and all he can say is **no.**"

LATE that night Joe Peterson rolled his bed over against the open window and flopped down, a thoroughly fatigued king. He propped his elbows in the window and stared out at the black night.

He had taken the precaution to arm himself, earlier in the evening, and

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had found a friendly Sash who was willing to demonstrate his own skill with a ray pistol for the king's benefit. The Sash didn't guess that he was giving Joe Peterson a lesson in the use of a Karridonzan weapon.

Now, with ray pistol at hand, Joe looked out at the night and wondered what mysteries the darkness held. He would try not to go to sleep as long as anyone was stirring in the palace. His life seemed as uncertain as a puff of thistle down, tossed in the breeze.

Had the attendants of the king become suspicious? For all his excuse of illness, his manners must have given him away many times. How could he have forgotten where he kept his own ray pistols? Why should he have stammered over little decisions regarding which clothing he would wear tomorrow? Why had he dodged the simple exercise of signing his name to a court note?

It was a terrific relief to be alone, at last. The Sashes on the night shift would play cards outside his door all night, no doubt, but at least no one would barge in without first stirring a commotion—

Unless they came in by way of the window. That darkness—it was something Joe Peterson had never been afraid of before. But tonight the whole hillside around the fortress abounded with people who had made camp for the night. They didn't want to return to the valley until morning. When Nitticello had ordered them to clear the grounds and go on home, they had only moved outside the limits of the courtyard, and there had bedded down to wait for morning.

Now a few stars pierced the clouds, and Joe felt better. He leaned a little farther out the window and tried to discern the marble ledge down below. He reached down to discover that it was only a foot and a half below his window sill. Beneath it were the windows of the lower floor, he recalled —high arched windows divided by marble columns. But no light emerged from them, and the ledge extended outward far enough to cut off the veiw.

That ledge would be a perfect catwalk for a prowler, he thought. He tried to dismiss the fancy from his mind. Again he rested his arms on the sill and closed his eyes.

Presently he thought he heard a light swisssssh from the ledge. He laughed to think how he'd kidded himself into imagining he had really heard something.

He opened his eyes. He saw nothing. Just the black shadowy ledge.

Swisssssh!

It was real. He could hear it but he couldn't see it. Then the long stripe of blackness directly beneath his gaze began to emerge into something purple, like an immense luminous rope. It was there, lying in gentle curves along the ledge.

A blotch of black broke the length of it a few yards away. The blotch of blackness was moving, and it was causing the low swisssssh. . . .

And then, to Joe's consternation, the luminous rope went out.

All was blackness again.

Joe's blood thawed just enough to resume circulation. For a moment it had frozen.

Swis-s-s-s--sh!

Nothing to be seen. But the thing was closer. Then came a whisper, almost directly beneath Joe's elbows.

"Slave! Are you there, slave?"

"Pudgy!" Joe gave a tight gulp. "Pudgy, you scary devil! What are you doing there."

"Dragged my feet so you'd hear me coming. I just dropped in to pay

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my respects to the new king."

"Come in off that ledge. The lavender vine was right there just half a minute ago. It started to turn visible and then it went out again."

"It's still here," said Pudgy. "I'm riding on it. It just now brought me up."

Joe's blood froze again. The thing was there, invisible.

PUDGY crawled in the window and hopped onto the bed. "Your majesty! I saw your performance at the execution grounds this afternoon. You did beautifully."

Pudgy's talk was welcome. His presence always warmed Joe's spirits, and just now Joe's spirits needed warming as never before. But Joe couldn't converse normally as long as he believed there was a branch of the lavender vine lying invisible right out side his window.

"What happened to it? Is it still there?"

"Well, if I were you, slave, I mean your majesty, I wouldn't reach my hand down. It's waiting to take me back. I won't stay but a minute."

Joe drew his arms back from the window sill. He mentioned that he had brought a ray pistol along for safety. But Pudgy only laughed and said that that wouldn't mean anything to the lavender vine.

"What I came to tell you was this, your majesty. You may not be a king much longer. You'd better enjoy it while you can."

"That's why I have this pistol."

"Well, I can't guarantee that they'll attempt to snuff your life out without giving you fair warning. I don't think they've gotten around to you yet. It's King Arvo they're fixing their designs for."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, it seems that Nitti's plan of exchanging you two boys didn't work out quite as well as he had hoped. Just when he thought he had you dangling on a string, it seems that you got up on your hind legs and walked off with the show. Very pretty, my boy," Pudgy chuckled. "Very pretty, but not safe. In that moment you reduced your puppet value to something like double zero. And there has to be a king."

"But King Arvo knows what they've pulled. Another minute and he'd have been ozone." Joe said. "How can they ever put him back in the harness?"

"Drugs. Hypnotism. Suggestions and ideas to confuse his sick thoughts. By the time he comes out of it they're going to have him believing that he's dreamed up all of this king-switching game himself. Dreamed it after he'd been accidentally bumped by Stobber when they were inside the door of your cell. And they're going to make him believe that the **real** happenings **were** real, except with the characters exchanged."

"They'll make him believe that **he** changed **his** mind the last minute and saved **me?"**

"Right. They'll tell him he went through his regular routine, looking down at the victim as though he imagined the fellow's plight—and now it seems he was out of his head all the time, imagining that he was that fellow."

"Ye gods!" Joe muttered. "Can they make that stick?"

"That's what they're going to try **if**—"

Pudgy stopped on the **if,** and switched to something that Joe would have termed parenthetical. Pudgy had seen that the lavender vine trouble had all at once gathered up into

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a terrific headache for the whole kingdom. The old timers were saying that there had never been a siege like this before. Nitti had argued that the old timers always said that, whenever the lavender vine stretched out for a few growing exercises up and down the valley. But this time it was worse. It was coming to a crisis. If the king's fortress was to stand solid and the prime minister was to prosper, something had better be done.

"The point is," said Pudgy, "the lavender vine is something Nitti has never been able to understand. King Arvo has an angle that Nitti doesn't have. And Nitti is going to try to get the secret before he dissolves Arvo into gas. That's why Nitti and Stobber are getting set to hoax the king out of his real memories of what happened this afternoon."

"You said they were going to try it—if." Joe came back to the unfinished business. "If what?"

"If they can find him," said Pudgy with a chuckle. "They don't know it yet, but when morning comes they're going to find him gone."

"How do you know?"

"Just for a little joke, I turned him loose—the lavender vine assisting—about ten minutes ago." Pudgy gave a laugh that Joe thought was definitely froggish, and added, "Well, I'd better go or I'll lose my ride. Don't shoot till I get out of range. Bye-bye."

CHAPTER XIII

IN one of the darkened camps within a mile of the fortress, six persons huddled around the dying coals of a campfire. They had become only shadowy figures to each other; and yet, with one exception, each one knew the other as well in the dark as if they were under floodlights.

The single exception was Marcia Melinda. She was the newcomer who, with one act of devotion, had won the inner circle's confidence.

Around the fire they were awaiting the return of two other members of the inner circle—two men who had volunteered to undertake a daring rescue.

Nadoff, the merry, round merchant, was speaking. He was more buoyant than ever tonight. Things had gone much better than anyone had expected.

"To think that we turned the treasure in the nick of time—We got our money! And—The king's own agent arrived in time to upset the execution. The cause of freedom has gathered great power on this day! Miss Melinda, we could hug you. Oh, you needn't be startled. We won't actually hug you, though you'd better keep a stern eye on our younger members, even though you've tried to disguise yourself as an elderly woman. Eh, Starwold? Mazoweb? Ah, but you needn't answer. I am simply beside myself with rejoicing. Listen. Are they coming?"

After a moment's silence, Nadoff went on. His high spirits didn't prevent his keeping a clear view of the evils that haunted every slavery fighter in the realm.

"No, Miss Melinda and brothers, we mustn't be misguided by the king's act. He postponed an unjust execution—yes. But don't let that soften your feelings toward him. Why did he do it? Because he believes this fellow will help him find Miss Melinda. Not out of a sense of mercy."

"You have good reason to be cautious, Nadoff," Mazoweb reminded the leader. "By this time they're on your trail for selling the jewels. They'll guard your shop and arrest

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anyone who comes asking for you."

"We've started the warnings circulating," Nadoff said. "The time to strike is near at hand."

"S-s-sh."

Marcia could hear soft footsteps approaching. At a little distance the rescuers identified themselves. Nadoff stirred the coals. The dim light barely outlined them. Not two, but three.

Two of them were the members who had gone on the errand.

The third was the tall, broad-shouldered "slave" who had so narrowly missed his execution that afternoon.

KING Arvo looked around at the strange group of people and knew that these were some of his less fortunate subjects. He was full of confused feelings about what had happened through this terrible day. He was burning over Nitti—Nitti, the traitor! He was seeing so much red that this very firelight before his eyes was pale in comparison.

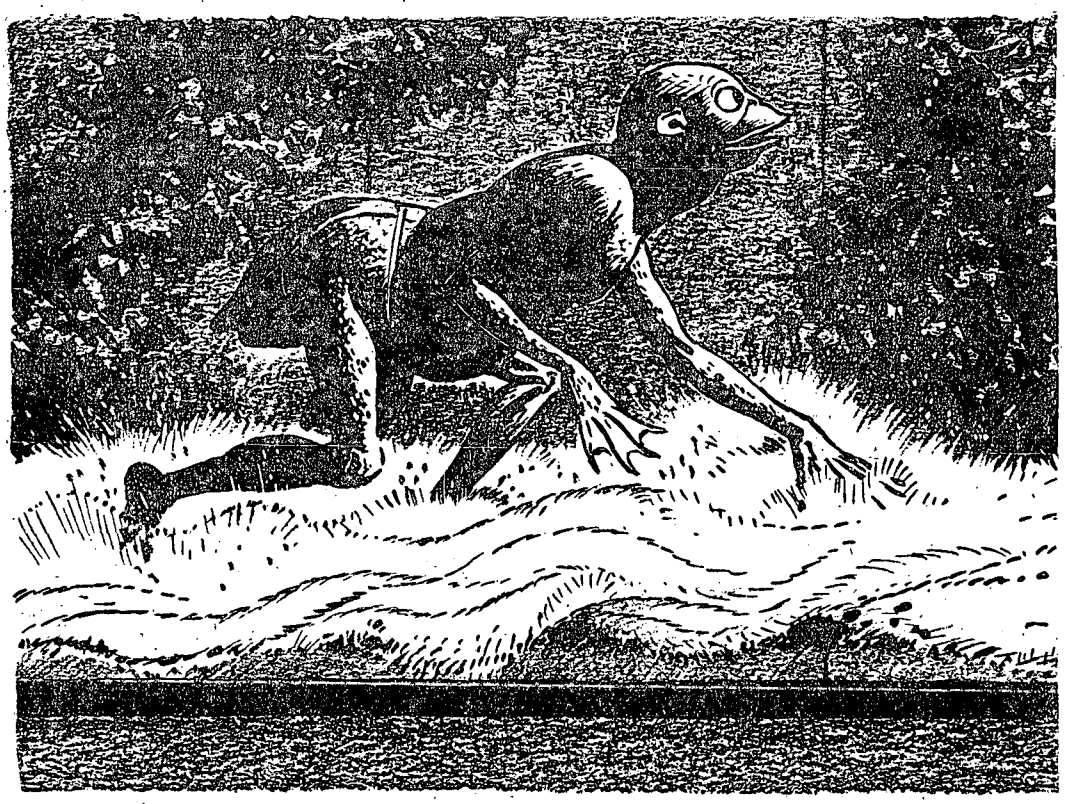
But these folks thought he was a slave. And they believed they had rescued him from a delayed execution.

Well, they were right on that count. It could have been murder tonight as easily as execution this afternoon.

They were talking about him. If he could only get his mind off Nitti and the palace and listen to them. They were trying to get him to talk—to tell them the inside news from the palace.

And since he was too groggy to enter their discussions, they allowed him to lie there quietly, as relaxed as a sack of meal, warming his face at the low fire.

They were talking about **him.** About King Arvo. Words of hatred against the king.



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He looked out of the window, ray-pistol ready, and saw the frog-boy creeping toward him . . .

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The awfulness of his situation needled him. He came up on his elbows, looked around at their intense, determined faces. **They were planning a rebellion!**

They had rescued him **from the king! From himself!** And they were going to make the king and Nitti pay for their crimes against the people! This was rare! His enemies confiding in him!

Then he rested his gaze upon the lovely peasant woman. She was speaking. That voice! **That was Marcia Melinda!**

Not dead? What had happened?

She was speaking to him. She was taking him to be the American slave. She was asking him to promise to help with the fight against the palace and later there would be a chance to go back to the earth—if they could win their battle against slavery!

He blurted, "You're not dead!"

"Ah, he talks," said the big, deep-throated leader they called Nadoff. "He's coming out of it."

"I'm not dead," Marcia Melinda was smiling through her disguise. "So you knew what the king and Nitti tried? Well, they missed me. I parachuted down before they struck my air spinner. Later it crashed. But I was already on the ground unharmed."

King Arvo exhaled in a deep breath of relief. "Thank the stars!" he mumbled It was if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He sat up. He stared at his slave clothes and passed his hand over his head. What a peculiar feeling, that American hair style which they had fixed on his head. The earth girl wouldn't know his real identity. After all, she had seen that American for only a few minutes. He had given his name as Joe Peterson; she had asked to have him accompany her; and then as she was about to go, she had kissed him, rather tenderly, Arvo thought.

"And she thinks I'm Joe Peterson," he said to himself. "She's remembering our one minute of friendship."

Arvo took a curious delight in this thought. . . But he was alarmed by their talk of a revolt against the king.

"I knew you'd be ready to help," Marcia was saying, "after all you've gone through."

"You want me to help fight the king?" Again he looked at his costume of slave rags. He swallowed hard.

"How about it?" Nadoff asked him pointedly. "Are you willing?"

"It's a strange idea," Arvo said uncertainly.

"There's nothing strange about it. If you've been through as much as the average slave, you don't need today's narrow escape as an added argument. You must know how all the slaves feel. Haven't you been beaten the same as the others?"

THEY started to examine his bare back for stripes of the whip, but he resisted, turning to the light. He was getting the idea, however, and he mumbled that he supposed he had been through as much as any of the slaves.

"I knew how you'd feel," said Marcia. "Free American citizens don't knuckle down to slave masters. What was your name—Joe? — Joe Peterson? You're uncomfortable, aren't you. Maybe the men can offer you a blanket. And food—are you hungry?

It wasn't like the elaborate care he was used to at the palace, but it was the best they had to offer, and he was grateful—deeply grateful to be in the hands of friendly people.

Friendly? Only because they believed he was Joe Peterson. Suppose

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he told them the truth. Then they would be as eager to kill him as Nitti had become. They would win their revolt instantly by forcing him to grant their demands.

Or would he be able to summon a few squads of loyal Sashes and have them executed on the spot?

Executed? That word stabbed through King Arvo with an entirely new meaning. He had almost been on the receiving end. It had become an ugly word all at once. And it used to be such a convenient word.

They smothered their fire and gathered their camp things together. It was time to get on. Dawn mustn't find them this close to the fortress grounds.

They hiked through the darkness. Marcia was at Arvo's side, and they both stayed close within the small party. Arvo didn't want to miss a word of what was being said.

"You're not well," Marcia had commented. "You don't seem the same. But I can understand, after what you've been through."

Yes, and if she had known who he was and what he was going through now—

The two men who had rescued him were speaking, telling of their long vigil around the palace waiting for a chance to slip in and pick up this "slave." It seemed that they had watched the prime minister and the "king" all through the evening hours. But at length they had had an unaccountable piece of luck. Apparently someone had released this prisoner by mistake and moved him out onto the grounds—someone who looked like a cross between a boy and a frog, obviously one of the freakish victims of the lavender vine.

King Arvo couldn't refrain from asking a question. "You say you watched the king?"

"Certainly we watched him."

"What was he doing?"

"Talking with officials and townsmen and slavemasters around the conference table.'

"What did he tell them?"

"Practically nothing. He complained of a bad throat."

Marcia, hiking along at Arvo's side, touched his arm meaningfully. "He was probably waiting for Nitticello to give him the answers."

"Oh, is that his way?" Arvo asked.

"He's always yielding to Nitticello," Marica said. "If he ever did anything else, Nitti would probably turn the palace upsidedown."

"The king must be very weak," said King Arvo, feeling the uncertainty of walking into a nest of lightning.

Marcia answered carefully. "I'm not sure that it's weakness. I'm afraid he began by being too kind and considerate, and Nitti knew how to take advantage right from the start. Frankly, there were many things about the king that I liked. He has a certain quiet strength, I believe, that he's never used to advantage."

The leader, Nadoff, cleared his throat. "Careful."

"But I believe it," said Marcia. "Haven't I a right to say what I believe?"

"The king is our sworn enemy," said Nadoff. "As long as there's a slave in Karridonza I have no use for the king. Look what he's done to this poor fellow."

"Stop," King Arvo said. "Light a lantern. Please."

"What's the matter with you?" Nadoff asked. He stopped the party and someone lighted a lantern. "What's wrong?"

"Hold the light up to my face," Arvo said. "Look at me. I'm not Joe

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Peterson. I'm not a slave. **I'm the king.**"

"What?" Nadoff gave a deep scowl. He was shaking his head slowly.

"Believe me, I'm King Arvo. I had to tell you. I couldn't let you go on talking."

Nadoff said, looking to Marcia, "Poor fellow! The strain has been too much."

Some of the other men laughed, but Nadoff quieted them. He had seen an overwrought slave do this very same thing once before, he said. It was a tragedy—a mind snapping this way. "We'll have to take care of him. "He's not the same Joe Peterson," Marcia said slowly, cutting him with her steady, penetrating eyes. "I don't know. . ."

"Put out the light," Nadoff said. "We've not time to loiter." And they hiked on into the night.

CHAPTER XIV

THEY moved westward along the crest of the ridge above the valley. Dawn came. They descended into the shadows and kept going.

The day brought several perilous encounters with other travelers. Some, like themselves, were returning from the execution that didn't happen. And if these parties were known to be in sympathy with the revolt, there were warm exchanges of plans and confidences.

But the reports came from all directions that groups of Sashes were out on a search for the "peasant woman" who had turned her gifts into cash for the benefit of rebels.

Scouts moved over the land in fortress air spinners, and Nadoff and the others were continually on the alert to hide Marcia and themselves whenever searchers came their way. Marcia exchanged her peasant woman's outfit for the clothing of a townsman, so there was less likelihood that scouts, flying over, would guess there was a woman in the party. She changed her make-up, and hid her hair under a cap.

But with the best of precautions, however, they couldn't avoid the net completely. A court car rounded the corner, where the road passed through a wooded area, and it was on them before they could hide.

It was loaded with Sashes, looking tough and belligerent. The king gulped. He saw the number as the car approached. He knew the captain of the outfit. Was it possible that he himself wouldn't be recognized?

Before he could get his wits together, Nadoff was snapping, "Down, you. Be tying my shoe. I'm your master."

The king obeyed. By the time the car came alongside, Nadoff, his back turned to the highway, was bending to direct the "slave." Was tongue-lashing him, in fact. Cursing him. The king was stung by it all. He wasn't used to being ordered around. But Nadoff knew what he was doing. He gave the king a slap across the head, and the king staggered back, more from surprise than pain.

It was just enough to distract the Sashes from their purpose; and later Nadoff explained that there was nothing that could divert Sashes so effectively as a slave-beating scene.

"They've done so much of it themselves that the sight of it draws them like a magnet. I hated to strike you, Joe Peterson. I know you're sick and your mind's a little dizzy. But you saw how it worked."

It had worked. The Sashes had evidently never guessed but what Nadoff was a slave master. It was rebels they were looking for. They had

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stopped one of the straggling members of the party long enough to ask if they'd seen a girl disguised as a peasant woman, or if they knew a merchant named Nadoff. The answers had been elusive enough. And Marcia, trembling in her disguise as a man, had taken their glares without wincing. The car had backed up, and one of the Sashes had jumped out and given the king three sharp lashes with a whip. That had satisfied the lot of them, and they had driven on.

"I'll have them in chains," the king muttered to himself stubbornly as the party moved along.

"You can't let a little whipping like that bother you," Nadoff said. "Under that delusion yet? Still think you're the king?"

"He may be the king," Marcia said.

"No king is a king unless he's wearing the official robes," Nadoff said. "Joe Peterson, I'm not saying that you don't have kingly qualities. But these Sashes aren't impressed by men. They're impressed by crowns. Just lucky for you they were looking for the girl and not an escaped slave."

"We're going to have to hide, aren't we, your majesty?" Marcia asked, looking through him.

"Yes," King Arvo said, smearing the bleeding lines across his side. "We'll hide long enough for me to take a lesson in being a slave. There are several things about it that I need to know."

CHAPTER XV

IN the palace of the king's fortress, high noon shone through the shiny glass windows and lighted the red goblet on the tray that had been set before Joe Peterson, "Acting King."

Joe had decided not to drink the wine that had been served with his luncheon. When the attendant came in, Joe offered it to him, and the attendant downed it at one gulp and was very well pleased over the favor all day long.

Joe's refusal of the wine was an index to his case of the jitters. He knew instinctively that something was about to happen.

"I damn well wish I could make something happen," he said to himself. And he was thinking in terms of his temporary crown. It was a haunting sensation, being in power. But it wouldn't last, he thought. Already Nitti had learned what a complete failure Joe had turned out to be, in the role of a puppet dangling on a string. The sore throat hadn't kept Joe from talking. After the recent conferences with some of the townspeople, the rumor was going the rounds that three or four important citizens of the kingdom had discovered they would rather do business with the king than with the prime minister. "No, it can't last long."

He looked out the window. Six times this morning he had looked down at the ledge, wondering whether that lavender thing was there, invisible.

Twice he had actually reached down to the ledge and brushed his hands along the stone. Now he was tempted to try it again.

He slipped through the window and allowed his feet to dangle toward the ledge. . .Swish! His elbows skidded off the sill and he fell.

He tried to catch himself on the ledge. A mad scramble. His hands missed. **They missed because he was being lifted.**

He swung upward through the air, caught in the clutches of a power he couldn't see.

He looked back at the receding pal-

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ace. Under the noon sun the trail of lavender was barely visible. The vine was carrying him out over the valley. "Hi there, slave. How's your majesty? Didn't know you had company, did you?"

And there was Pudgy, sliding down what must have been an arm of the vine, though Joe couldn't see it.

"Pudgy! Where are you taking me?"

"I'm taking myself down to the marshes. Come along?"

"No. Take me back."

"Talk to the vine, don't talk to me," Pudgy answered. Then with a weird laugh right up the scale and down again, "Hey, don't look so scared. You're the king, you know."

"That's why I need to get back—"

"That's why you need to go out and visit your people. So long, King."

The vine bent low, a hazy ribbon waving over the green marshes. Pudgy swooped over the surface, let go and dived into the water with a happy splash. Then Joe was being carried on, up and up, across the ridges to the west of the fortress. For the first time, after his many months of enslavement, he was getting a bird's eye view of the kingdom.

AFTER several minutes of riding westward, crossing under clouds that made the vine momentarily visible, he began to descend. It was like an invisible slipperslide. He tried to hold on. The vine took that responsibility out of his hands. The substance was as steamy as a rope of cloud.

Down, down a long curved sloping course—and then the vine grew stouter and gathered around him like pillows and bore him up just enough to break his fall.

Thump. His two feet struck the ground just below a low cliff. And there was Marcia Melinda!

She gave a little scream of fright. Then, "Oh, it's you. You, I mean." She was looking at his clothes, his royal boots, his medals, his false mustache and spade-shaped beard. "Or is it you?"

"It's Joe, if you remember. . .Joe Peterson, the slave."

"That's what I meant. You see, I just talked with the king a minute ago and he was worrying because he didn't have a royal costume. But where did you come from?"

He dodged the question long enough to give her the questioning eye of a guest who isn't sure whether he should have dropped in. This was a hiding place, apparently—a small alcove in the low cliff. A few yards farther down were other depressions in the bank of stone, and he guessed, from the low mumble of voices in that direction, that a party of fugitives from justice had made camp here.

"Nice bit of scenery you have here," he observed. "You're far enough from the highway that you ought to be safe. Are you traveling alone? I mean you and the king?"

"I can trust you, Joe Peterson, can't I?"

He shrugged and raised his eyebrows. He hoped to goodness she could trust him! He wasn't telling her, but the very sight of her sent a wild thrill through him. She had beautiful hair, he thought. She was combing it when he barged in. She was dressed in the clothes of a townsman, but she looked wonderfully feminine to him.

"Of course, I can trust you," she said. "After you saved the king's life from Nitti, out there on the execution grounds—"

"Were you there?"

"I was hiding beyond the grounds,

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waiting."

"How did you know it was I?"

"I didn't until this very minute," she said, looking intently at him. "You traded, of course! I should have known."

"Nitti traded us. We hadn't anything to say about it."

"It's pretty gruesome, working with Nitti, isn't it? I always knew he'd do something desperate if the king ever challenged his power. The king recently told me."

Joe's throat tightened. "You and the king are probably getting pretty well acquainted, aren't you?"

She tossed her head, and her hair fell over her shoulder. "What do you mean by that question?"

"Would you like to see him back in his rightful place?"

"I'm not sure. It's his throne. And in a way he isn't a bad person. He has a good heart. Yes, I'm getting acquainted with him, and I like him. Frankly, I do."

Joe turned and edged away uncomfortably. He looked toward the shadows of the trees that overhung the cliff, wondering whether the lavender vine was still there.

Then her hand was on his arm and she was looking up at him smiling. "I don't know where you came from, but I'm terribly glad to see you again. I've been thinking about you."

The words warmed him. "The lavender vine brought me. I think it must have brought me this way because I was wanting to see you again."

"Yes?"

"Yes," Joe said sternly. "I've been thinking of escaping this world and getting myself over to the skystation. The vine might have taken me there. But I was thinking of you." He caught her arms in his hands, drawing her a little closer. "You want to go back to the earth, too, I'm sure. I thought I'd take you with me."

SHE was a keen looking person, he thought meeting his eyes that way, not fearing him, nor yielding to him against her will—just trying to know him; trying to gauge his strength and the sureness of his purpose.

"You don't belong here," he said.

"I've found a purpose here," she said slowly. "It's as important to these people as any of our earth problems are to us. I'm beginning to feel as if I have a place here."

"The lavender vine is out there somewhere," he said, and then his voice was soft. "Let's go together—you and I—now—"

"I'd like to—"

He drew her close and then he was kissing her, kissing her as if he had never known the sweetness of a woman before—as if this faraway world contained nothing for him but Marcia Melinda. And that was the way it was.

She was smiling a little as she drew away. "You didn't let me finish my sentence."

"You said you'd like to—"

"I'd like to—to think it over."

"Why? Aren't the facts plain enough? If they weren't a minute ago they ought to be now."

"Yes, I'm understanding you, Joe . . .But the king. We'd leave him in a dreadful lot of trouble."

"I saved his hide yesterday, didn't I? Now it's up to him."

"They're not going to believe he's the king. He's been letting his beard grow, but unless he has his royal robes and someone to identify him, he'll have trouble getting out of his slave station. And you know, he's a runaway. At any time they may find him and kill him."

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Joe studied her coolly. Finally he said, "All right. Let me go change clothes with him right now. Then we're free—"

"If we could help him just a little, he has the possibilities of being decent, believe me, if he only has a chance. Already he's changing his opinions about slavery and executions. . . Yes, I mean it, Joe. .You're not doubting me?'

"I'll go change clothes with him," Joe said, somehow feeling icy in his fingertips. She was in love with the king, Joe thought. Maybe she didn't know it, but how else could her actions be explained? "I'll go and find him."

But as soon as Joe stepped out of the protection of the cliff, the invisible fingers of the lavender vine caught him and lifted him up toward the clouds, and the next thing he knew he was many miles away, dropping down in the marsh beside Pudgy.

CHAPTER XVI

"WELCOME! Welcome!" Pudgy shouted. "Come on in. The water's fine for upset nerves."

"That lavender vine is running my life," Joe growled.

He picked himself up out of the clump of marsh grass and adjusted his kingly garments. It was easy enough for a creature that was half boy and half frog to splash around in those muddy waters, but it was not a place for a king to be dropped. He stepped from one grassy island to another until he reached a bank of dry earth.

Pudgy followed him, his bright green skin shining through the water's surface as he swam alongside.

"You must have wanted to come here," Pudgy said. "You must have wanted to walk out on a conversation or something, the way that vine brought you back in such a hurry.

"Don't try to tell me it does only what I wish it to do," Joe said sourly. "I've got a hunch that dozens of persons are wishing a dozen different conflicting things at once. How can any magical power serve everybody?"

Pudgy blinked his big green eyes and chortled to himself. Then Joe caught the angle.

"Oh, I get it. I came back because that's what you wanted. It was your wish. You probably said to yourself, Please, Lavender Vine, let Joe Peterson drop smack in the middle of this mud puddle. Was that it?"

"Ugh," Pudgy said.

"Guilty or not guilty?"

"You see," said Pudgy, "the vine does some nice favors for nice people."

"And it does some mischief, just to keep freaks like me amused."

"Guilty or not—"

"Guilty! I needed a playmate."

"You might pick on someone beside the king. I am the king, you know—temporarily."

Joe had removed his boots to drain the water out of them and he dangled his feet in the pool. Pudgy whistled at him and motioned him to take his feet out of the water.

"You won't be a king long if you spend your time in the water. I'd just as well let you in on the secret. Right after you've been riding around in the atmosphere of the lavender vine, you're susceptible."

"Susceptible? To what?" Joe jerked his feet out of the water and dried them on the lining of his mud-splashed royal robe.

"Susceptible to change. You're in danger of changing into something that fits your thoughts or actions.

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That's how the change came over me. I thought it was a lot of fun, playing frog that time after the vine dropped me in here. I was just a small boy then. I kept splashing around, and I never guessed that I was beginning to change. Then I felt the webs forming between my toes, and when I got out on the bank, about where you're sitting, I saw that my skin was turning green and shiny. So that's how it happened."

"Ye gods!" Joe got into his boots and began to hike away, glancing back at the marsh with a feeling of horror.

Pudgy followed him. "Don't worry, you won't turn frog like I did. You haven't been playing frog."

"No, I should hope not."

"No, you're safe from webbed feet and green skin. You've been playing king."

JOE stoped in his tracks. The words struck home like a dart through the brain. Playing king? Yes, he had been. In fact, he had been swept away, within the past hour, by a strong desire to make the most of his crown.

"That can happen to anyone," the frog boy was rattling on. "As long as you're still soaked with the vine, you can easily bend into the thing you happen to be wanting."

Joe began to stride up the highway rapidly.

"What's the matter?" Pudgy called after him. "Did I say the wrong thing?"

"I don't want to be anybody but Joe Peterson," Joe retorted.

He thought he heard a froggish chuckle. He hurried on. But all the way up the long slope he kept hearing it at intervals—the faint chortling of a mischievous frog-like boy.

He caught a ride with one of the court cars of Sashes, returning from their day of scouring the countryside. He explained that he had gone for a walk unattended. No one questioned his explanation. He was the king. They escorted him up the steps to the plaza, past the row of nine torch lanterns, and around the palace to a private entrance. It had been a disturbing afternoon. He was glad to get back into the seclusion of his private study.

Behind the locked doors, he began to think of Marcia. She had spoken of finding a place for herself in this world—a purpose. well, maybe he'd make a place for himself too.

He selected one of the crowns from the shelf of the king's dressing room, walked to the mirror and tried it on. It was an informal crown of cloth, with a silken lining that rested softly over his narrow mane of hair. The ornaments were of precious stones, and their glitter in the mirror threw flashes of colored light around the room.

He stood gazing at himself, imagining the conference table with the palace officials and the officers from the several provinces sitting around, waiting for him to speak.

He heard a shuffling noise, and he whirled to see—**Pudgy again!**

"Three more crowns on the shelf, your majesty, if you want to try them on for size."

"Pudgy, you damned mischief! How'd you catch up with me so quick?"

"There's a ledge outside your window, and on it you will see—ahem!—nothing. But it's there, slave. And that's why I'm here. Now if you'd like something in a solid gold crown—"

"S-s-sh! Don't say it."

"It's got you going, hasn't it? Come on, tell me. Where's the real king? Didn't you get to see him today? Or

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have they already cornered him and shot his heart out with a ray gun?"

Joe felt guilty. He put the crown back on the shelf.

"If they shoot him," Pudgy pursued, hopping up on the polished table, "You'll get to be king and the girl will be queen. And you could make me prime minister. Aha! I'd be just the fellow. Take 'em out and execute 'em, boys, I need diversion!"

"Stop it, Pudgy. You've no grasp of the situation."

"Didn't you get to see the girl? I thought you were wishing—"

"I saw her and she's the most rebellious citizen in the kingdom. She's working up a revolution. It's enough to make us kings quake in our boots."

"There you are," said Pudgy with a knowing laugh. "The first lesson in being king: you're in constant fear. Fear of revolution. Fear of assassination. Your best friend may murder you in your sleep. . . .Shall I bring in the gold crown?"

But at that moment an attendant called to say that Nitti wanted to see the king at once. Pudgy shrugged, hopped to the window and disappeared.

CHAPTER XVII

IT was a dinner to be remembered. Everything in the line of luxurious food that Joe had ever dreamed of was served. And the drinks—Karridonzan concoctions that made the servants look on jealously from the doorways while Nitti himself filled the goblets—Joe never had known there could be such delights!

Then the pressure was descending upon him. Nitti. The dinner, the elegance of service, the brilliance of it all—and Nitti's clever words.

"You have the chance to be such a king as Karridonza has never known before, slave. What you have seen here tonight is only a small sample of the luxuries that will be yours if you decide to play the game."

Joe was thinking of it. But seriously. Luxuries. Power. Importance. The pleasure of meting out justice. A beautiful palace in which to live. Unlimited service. And a queen? He shook his head, a little dizzy with it all. No, the person he'd want for queen would be out working with the common people, stirring up discontent against the imperfections of the king.

"What's the cost?" Joe asked, in the matter of fact manner of a customer asking for his check at a supper club.

Nitti edged closer to him. "Just let me run the show my own way, that's all."

The words were straightforward enough, Joe thought, but he didn't like the gesture. Nitti had placed the point of the carving knife on Joe's wrist, and he added a little pressure with each word. Joe cleared his throat uncomfortably, and when Nitti failed to observe what was wanted, Joe removed the blade with his other hand.

"O, pardon me," said Nitti.

"I'm slightly allergic to knife blades," Joe said.

"You'll find them indispensable for dealing with your subjects," said Nitti. "The hour of decision is at hand. Within a very short time we shall have ended the life of a certain runaway slave, if you know whom I mean. So there'll be a lifetime job for you—his one living double."

Joe took a deep breath. He rose, walked around his chair, paused to look at himself in the mirror, and thought, for some strange reason, of the ugliness of Karridonzan manes

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as compared to American haircuts. He sat down and planted a fist on the table.

"You're doomed, Nitti. I'd be a fool to tie myself to the apron strings of a doomed man."

"Who said I was doomed?"

"Who?" Joe tried to think. Had the frog boy said it? Or was it the words of Marcia Melinda that were echoing. "I believe it was the frog boy."

"The frog boy?" Nitti made a wry face. "You aren't serious. What does that half-witted child know about it?"

"I think he gets around," said Joe.

"He's nothing but a court nuisance. Spends his time in the swamps."

"Where'd he come from?"

"He was the son of a troublesome old philosopher who used to keep books for us—a fellow who got too headstrong and had to be dispatched. He was over-scrupulous about the court's records of accumulated gold—taxes and such. Things have gone much smoother since we got rid of him. The son had learned something about the lavender vine, and began riding it back and forth, and the thing left its curse on him. He is only useful as a whipping boy."

Joe nodded and was going to let it go at that. But his words had disturbed Nitti.

"Just what did he say?"

Joe shrugged. "If he's only half-witted, what's the difference?"

"What did he say? Why am I—in his foolish mind—**doomed?**"

JOE tried to recall. Some wisps of the afternoon's conversation came back to him. "He said you were doomed because you don't control the vine."

Nitti's fingers twitched, and Joe thought he went tense.

"Go on."

All at once Joe's newly found powers were working. He was a king and a diplomat and a statesman, and he had opinions that people wanted to hear. Yes, he would tell it to Nitti, straight.

"You're headed for destruction on two counts, Nitticello. One. Your past cruelties are about to boomerang. The slaves are going to rebel unless you change things at once."

"I've heard that one before."

"Two. The people are restless over the chance actions of the lavender vine. It may be serving the court's wishes, but it's terrorizing the people. Unless you can convince them that you have it under control, your house of cards is going to fall."

"So. . ." Nitti wasn't even seeing Joe. He was looking off at the darkened sky beyond the plaza, and his fingers were knotted white. He ground his teeth and narrowed his eyes and mumbled something to himself. Then facing Joe, he bit his words with decision. "All right. I'll show you. I'll control that vine. Once I've got it, I'll put down all the troubles. I'll clean the slate. I'll—"

Joe broke in with a follow-through bluff, and even as he spoke he half realized that he was going too far. But if he could make Nitti believe he already possessed a power that Nitti didn't have—

"I already have the vine at my command." Joe said. **"It's outside my window this very minute."**

"You! Why you young upstart! You're a foreigner. You can't possibly mean—you're lying! You're lying!"

"Do you want to see it?" Joe was keeping a calm front, through the hard thumping of his pulses.

They went to his window, and Joe pointed and said, "Watch it, and I'll make it perform."

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Nitti bent to the window. "I don't see a damned thing."

"Turn around and you will," Joe said, reaching for the ray pistol on the bed table. "Up with those hands. Hold them high."

"Why, you sun-struck idiot! You damned sun - struck idiot!" Nitti's hands went up. His eyes were blazing a murderous fire that might have been a match for any ray gun, Joe thought. But Joe had him, and he knew it, and all his wail was bluff. "I'll kill you for this. I'll—"

"Save it. March this way." Joe gestured.

"Damn me if I won't make a torch out of you, and burn every fiber out of your—"

"Shut up! Into that corner. Back. Another step. Put your hands against the wall—"

Joe broke off with a gulp. An epaulette disappeared from his own shoulder, and a blast of air brushed the side of his arm. A strip of his sleeve disintegrated before his eyes. A silver stream of ray fire from the opposite side of the room was cutting an outline down the side of his body.

The mirror showed him—Stobber! Stobber held a white metal pistol as steady as starlight. One quaver of his hand would have melted a lung out of Joe's chest. Or cut his hip away. Or sliced into his brain.

In front of Joe, within three feet of Nitti, who stood facing the wall, the ray was drawing a path, shaped in lines of Joe's figures, in the plaster and stone of the partition.

"Relax, Nitti," Stobber called. "Try facing this way. It's all mine. Drop your gun on the table, slave."

Joe obeyed.

"That's fine," Nitti said, turning. "I counted on you. I gave this man a chance. It pays to know whether we can trust our new king. This makes twice that he's gone off half-cocked."

THE ray blaze had disappeared. Joe turned to face the husky orange-sashed chief of the guards. As usual, the mane over his head was dyed with stripes of green and orange. For once Stobber wasn't wearing his adornments of emeralds. He hadn't wanted any flashes of light to give him away. As the two men talked Joe gathered that he been under the strict watch of Stobber all evening. The two men were playing hand-in-glove, all right. The kingdom was in the palm of their partnership hand. All they needed was a fake king to keep up a front for them.

And all Joe needed just now was for Stobber to drop his guard for one split second.

They were leading him into his dressing room. He'd have to get out of those cut-away clothes before anyone else saw him. The Sashes would never be able to believe that there was a little war going on, right in the inner circle.

"Get that blue uniform on and be quick about it," Nitti snapped. "Keep him moving, Stobber. I'll see that the path is clear to the basement. What the palace folks don't know won't hurt them."

Nitti's footsteps receded. Stobber's form filled the door of the dressing room. Joe hurried into a different uniform. What did they think they could do with him? The basement again? There'd never be a second escape from that dungeon, Joe thought. But it was probably quick death, this time. Anyway if Stobber had his way—

That one unguarded split second! Joe whirled and caught Stobber's gun arm. The ray blazed across the dressing room and cut a slice through doz-

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ens of suits and uniforms hanging there. The lower halves dropped with a swoosh. The ray was slicing in all directions, and it cut through the steel rod from which the uniforms hung. Three or four sections of the pipe fell, and Joe and Stobber were under them, struggling, rolling on the floor. For an instant Joe thought he had the ray pistol under control. Not so. It sliced down through the door, and half of the panel crashed to the floor.

Then the pistol went flying off into the other room, and the blaze of light had stopped. Stobber was up, he was coming at Joe as Joe rose to his knees. Joe caught his weight and went backward, and his head crashed against the wall. A picture fell. Stobber fell too, for Joe had him by the legs, and then Joe was on him, punching him, and catching the fellow's sledge hammer fists in his own face.

They rolled into a corner where the king kept a collection of weapons. Stobber reached for a knife. Joe slugged him. He staggered and tried to get up. He was on knees and knuckles and he had a knife. But Joe pounced on him, and the knife clanged and they both scrambled for it—

And then the net of cable fell from the ceiling and they were both trapped under it. Nitti was in the doorway. He had pulled the cord. Above the weapon collection the metal net had hung, waiting to be tripped by the pull of a cord. It hung over both of them, and they couldn't fight against it.

"I've got him, Stobber," Nitti said, an arrogant smile on his lips. He was rather pleased, Joe thought, that he had proved himself the master of the situation where the chief of the guards had failed. "The way to the basement is clear."

CHAPTER XVIII

JOE gave a pained sigh. Too much exertion after a heavy meal, he thought. And here he was, again a prisoner in the basement cell where Pudgy had once before come to his rescue.

The steps of the prime minister and his fiendish bodyguard (the handsome and dignified chief of the Sashes!—and how Joe hated him!) shuffled away into silence. They weren't walking too spryly themselves, Joe thought. Neither one of them would feel like another fight for a few hours he'd just bet.

And on that theory they probably assumed that he would fall asleep and rest quietly until they could figure out what to do with him.

That's where they were wrong. Joe went to work on the rock in the floor.

"That may be my own little secret," Joe said to himself. "Mine and Pudgy's. I wonder—"

He pried at the stones. A new understanding of this exit had come to him. It was directly over the giant funnel. It had probably been formed originally, not by the builders of this fortress, but by the vine itself. The thing had no doubt pushed this rock out in the first place, for Pudgy had certainly never been strong enough to lift it alone.

Joe's wish may have done it this time. Or it may have been the words he was chanting in his mind. "Seevia . . . Seevia . . . Seevia. . ."

The floor stone lifted with hardly any help from Joe. He placed it at one side of the opening, and sure enough, there was the whole magnificent tree of lavender light, rising up through the deep well. Like a huge plant out of a colossal stone vase. And one branch of the thing was whipping

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itself silently against the opening in Joe's floor.

He remembered how Pudgy had coaxed it to come on through. He tried the motions, fanning at it with his hands. Within a minute or two his chains were cut. He was free? No, not quite! The steel door hadn't been left ajar this time.

For the next half hour he worked in vain, trying to get the whipping arm of the vine to slide across to the door and cut its hinges.

It wasn't working. The vine seemed to have gone its limit. It receded through the hole in the floor. He bent down to watch it.

"Pudgy would leap for it," he said to himself. "Why shouldn't I?"

AS many times as it had carried him successfully, he shouldn't lack for confidence. And yet it would be-like-leaping into shafts of steam. Or ropes of cloud. It looked no more substantial than the stream of light that a searchlight sends into a foggy sky.

He lowered himself part way through the opening and hung there, supporting himself from the elbows. Now he saw the course he wanted to follow. If the large central trunk would catch him, he would slide from it to the down-sweeping branch on the left, and drop from it to a lower, flimsier looking arm beneath—and that one was pretty sure to bend with him and let him down over the steps. Not the deeper steps a hundred feet down, but the outer steps well out of danger from the center of the funnel.

From this point he would be able to make his way back into the palace, he thought. And he would go right to the headquarters of the Sashes. Yes, that would be the right maneuver. Stobber wouldn't be there. No, Stobber and the prime minister would be in some private chamber holding an all night conference. They had a "problem king" on their hands, and they'd be deciding what to do with him.

Joe chuckled. He'd turn the tables yet tonight. Before the Sashes got wind of the trouble he'd have them under control.

But what about the vine? Could he control that too?

The vine had been darned good to him, he couldn't deny that. But he knew he had struck a deep truth when he told Nitti that any ruler of this land was doomed if he couldn't make the vine serve him.

He lowered himself further and hung by the fingertips for a moment. The lavender light blazed in his eyes. Once more he traced his course mentally. The vine arms were moving slowly. He'd better make the leap now before they changed too much.

He dropped.

The steamy light passed through his hands. He was going down.

It wasn't catching him. And he wasn't catching it. He was falling straight for the center of the funnel. He scrambled wildly. He might as well have snatched at the air. He was falling. The series of white stone stairs that curved around in terraces, closing in toward the funnel's center, were slipping past him. He was falling straight and fast.

Down, down—now it was the vertical shaft around him, nothing else—down, down through the bottomless well of light.

CHAPTER XIX

DOWN. . . down. . . He wasn't sure whether he was breathing. He began to wonder whether he was still

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falling. Or whether he was just suspended there. The steamy, luminous substance was simply racing past him, he thought. No, the white stone walls were flowing upward too, when ever he could catch glimpses of them. If he had spread his arms he might have burned his fingers on them.

Down. . . down. . .

The luminous substance was thickening. He was falling more slowly Now he lost the dread of striking solid bottom and feeling his life crush out. He was coasting, leisurely. . .

And he was hearing sounds.

Sounds of human voices. Far away, yet close within the walls. A welter of little sounds. A confusion of many people talking at once. Scores of little conversations overlapping each other.

And his own breathing—he could hear it, and it almost drowned the faint little sounds. It was better if he held his breath. Yes, now he could hear plainly. He had stopped falling. He breathed again. He was falling again, and again the echoes of conversations were tumbling over each other.

Presently he was finding the key to the weird situation. Breathing very slowly, he lingered within range of certain conversations long enough to catch the drift.

Now he was hearing the chant of several voices. The plaza. They were holding their religious rites up there on the surface again tonight. And the lavender vine was sensitive to their song.

The voices began to fade. Then Pudgy's voice came through, clear and strong. Pudgy was singing the religious song too. Singing alone. And when Joe knew it was time to recite their prayers, he heard Pudgy praying that he could be closer to the lanterns, and that the guards wouldn't chase him away.

"Strange little fellow!" Joe thought. And as he breathed again, he fell again. The lavender light flowed upward, and a hundred more voices chattered. . . Rebel talk. . . . Fear of the vine. . Talk of escaping the Sashes . . the outcry of a slave, asleep, dreaming he was being punished.

Then came the voice of Marcia.

Joe held his breath. Yes, it was Marcia talking with some native girl, confiding in her.

"If you could help me make Nadoff believe," Marcia was saying, "I would be so grateful. I've tried to tell him that this man is the king. I know he is. I think Nadoff doesn't want to believe me because he's beginning to like this fellow—and he knows he doesn't like the king! So you see?"

The native girl said, "You like him too, I believe."

"Yes, now that I understand him. He had certain qualities that a king needs. He could do what we rebels don't have a chance to do. I mean, if he were back on the throne—"

"And if he had a good woman back of him," the Karridonzan girl added.

"Please don't misunderstand."

Joe was quivering, and his lips went tight.

"Do you mean you're not in love with him?" the girl asked. Her voice sounded plaintive. "I thought from the way he has idolized you—"

"I'm doing what I can to help him regain his confidence," Marcia said. "But I'm not thinking of love."

"There's someone else you're in love with, then. There must be. Is it that American slave you've been telling me about?"

Marcia's words were so quiet and so far away that Joe's heart almost stopped beating as he listened.

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"The American slave is the man I've always dreamed of."

The girl murmured some sort of Karridonzan blessing. "Do you know him well?"

"I met him only recently. But a little frog-boy named Pudgy has told me many things about him. And Pudgy goes everywhere and knows everything. I hope I'll see the American again."

Joe drew a deep, filling breath of air—and dropped away from the voice that had held him spellbound.

FOR many minutes the passing voices meant nothing to him. He wanted to close his eyes and simply fall, slowly and peacefully, through this mysterious well of light. This was a one way passage, he believed. It seemed unlikely that he would ever find his way out. And if this was to be all—if there should never be another glimpse of sunshine, or another conversation with living human beings, then he wanted those pretty words of Marcia to keep ringing—

A harsh note intruded upon his reverie.

The voice of Nitticello!

With half a breath, Joe stopped again. And before he had listened for more than a few seconds he discovered that the conversation was drifting along with him, so that he could breathe slowly without passing out of range.

It was a tense hour for Nitticello and Stobber, and Joe could feel the feverish eagerness with which they worked.

They were searching for the secret of the lavender vine.

"Here it is," Nitti was saying. "On page one hundred. An old legend. Some crackpot historian's theory."

"Read it." said Stobber. Joe could guess from the muffled words that Stobber was nursing a swollen face.

Nitti read, "That which you give to others the vine also gives to you."

"Read on."

"Give the people bread, and the vine will give **you** bread."

"That's foolishness," Stobber growled. "Who gives us bread? The servants put it on the table, but the chefs prepare it, and the baker makes it, and before that there's the slaves—they raise the grain and grind it—"

"This means the vine would give the bread to the slaves," said Nitti. Joe could imagine he heard a grinding of teeth. Nitti read on. "Give service to your fellow men, even as a good king, and the vine will give you service."

"Humph!"

"Give them death and it will give you—"

"Stop it!" Stobber shouted. "I don't want to hear any more of that damned nonsense. There ought to be a better book somewhere in this junk heap. Let's look around."

Then Joe could hear the shuffling of books and the occasional scraping of feet. Their voices were conspicuously silent.

"Here's something," Stobber said finally. "When the lavender vine hangs itself upon the sun, great troubles will fall upon the land."

Nitti retorted that that was nothing new. All the old timers could quote that one. "And after all, what does it mean? It never happens, does it? How could the vine hang itself on the sun. The sun's millions of miles away. The vine's here. Right here under our palace."

"You mean it would be here if it stayed at home," said Stobber. "People are seeing it everywhere these days. The slave masters have been

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seeing it all over the valley. And some of the Sashes claim that one arm of it has been hanging along the ledge under the new king's window—"

"S-s-s-sh. Someone's coming."

Joe listened intently. It must have been one of the Sashes, he decided. Stobber ordered him to come on in.

"We're just browsing through some old books," Nitti said. "Help us put them back on the shelves."

"I came to report something very strange, sir," the Sash said, and he was breathless about it.

"What is it?" Stobber snapped.

"The sun's coming up, sir—"

"Is there anything strange about that?"

"It looks like it has purple veins on it, sir. I think it's the vine, sir, hanging in the air between us and the sun. But some of the old people are in a panic. They say it means catastrophe —"

Joe's unintentional sharp breathing sent him gliding away once again, and the remainder of the conversation was lost.

CHAPTER XX

JOE never knew when he went through the curve that reversed his direction, but he was surely falling up instead of down.

From somewhere out of the marshes he came through the surface, falling feet first—upward—into the open air.

He was half a mile high before he could realize that this was the same Karridonzan valley. Mentally he was still descending through the vine—until he discovered the rising sun.

He continued to fall upward. He was fountaining up through a shaft of the vein that couldn't be seen plainly in the sunlight. But wherever a shadow crossed it, from a wisp of cloud, it showed in clearcut lines. It was like a geyser, Joe thought, rising through miles of air, straight toward the zenith.

He swung past a few scattered clouds, and then again he was within plain view of the sun. And there was more of the lavender vine! It was everywhere this morning. The whole countryside was alive with it!

"It hangs on the sun," he repeated. "There's a catastrophe ahead."

High over the valley he tried holding his breath to see whether he could stop his dizzy ride through what seemed to be only thin air. No, he was floating with just enough motion to cause the trees and buildings to turn gently, miles beneath him.

Now he began to descend.

He looked down to the red rectangles that comprised the palace roof far below. He tried to discern the ledge along one side of the building, wondering whether this particular arm of the vine would settle at that resting place.

"No, there aren't any rules," he told himself. "It springs out of the mysterious depths of the planet in any quantity. It's like the wind. It grows until it's everywhere at once. It diminishes until it's nowhere. How can anyone ever control it?"

Many minutes passed before he realized that he was no longer falling. He was resting, high in the air, with nothing but an almost invisible trunk of light supporting him.

An air spinner from the skystation came across the purple mists and landed in the palace grounds. From this elevation Joe couldn't tell whether one person or many had arrived. He guessed that the visitor wouldn't stay long, for the spinner wasn't being wheeled into a hangar.

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His curiosity was at work. Although he had fancied the idea of taking a brief nap here in the sky, in case the vine decided to hold him at this point, his curiosity—his **wish**—started him in motion again. He was descending.

"Service!" He smiled to himself. No wonder Pudgy was so happy and carefree—for Pudgy knew what it was to make a wish and have the vine obey.

There was just a moment of panic for Joe as he came down squarely over the roof of the palace. If he landed on the ledge, could he be sure the way was clear. Or would Nitti be right there waiting?

But Joe didn't land on the ledge. Instead, he moved gently and noiselessly right through the roof. The stones folded back and he dropped through the opening, within five feet of one of the tall brick chimneys.

Ceilings and floors made way for him through the upper levels. Then he slowed to a stop and found himself sitting on a heap of small objects in a very tiny room.

IT was almost completely dark. When his eyes adjusted, he saw that the light came from one miniature window no larger than a saucer. The window was a mosaic of glass that admitted a hundred little blades of colored light. And Joe suddenly realized that he was sitting on a heaped treasure of coins and precious stones.

Nitti's treasure, of course! Joe gasped. His fingers touched the surfaces of coins all around him. He should have velvet gloves on. It was bewildering, unbelieveable, untouchable. From the outlines of the little room, he guessed that it would take more than a dozen large trunks to hold this collection. And here he was, sitting on it and barely able to breathe.

What had the vine meant by dropping him into the middle of this awful secret?

"Whooiee! Does King Arvo know about all this? What's Nitti up to anyway?"

Even as he was gasping for understanding, he heard the slight thump of footsteps outside the thick wall.

A door opened very slowly. It was a thick metal door, and Joe felt the swoosh of air before he saw the thin vertical crack of light.

Only two inches open, the door stopped. Nitti and a stranger were talking. The stranger, a thick chested fellow in a dark green business suit, was trying to look in. Nitti wasn't quite ready for him to see.

"It's the same plan we've discussed many times before, Rouzey. If you can use serums and convert my slaves into interplanetary thieves as you've always claimed you can, I have enough treasure here for us to start action."

Rouzey may have come from another planet, Joe thought. His voice was as metallic as a copper gong. "Those I can't convert I can kill," Rouzey said. "We've already proved that part of it. But we can't get far, shaking down the whole interplanetary world unless we've got plenty of gems and gold to start with. As your man Stobber says, we'll need it for bait."

"That's the plan." Nitti opened the door another inch wider. "You're ready to start?"

"As soon as you buy out the skystation so we'll have a respectable base where the travelers pass."

"That's easy," said Nitti. "I'm all set to buy the new skystation office building." His inflection on the word

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buy caused the stranger to laugh with a weird clang of his metallic throat.

Then Rouzey said, "All right. We know the deal, and we can get a choke hold on three planets before the big sleepy nations get wise. Then they'll be too late. But we've got to play it smart. Are you sure your king doesn't know you've scraped this wealth together?"

Nitti laughed. "That whiff. I've kept him too busy bleeding the kingdom for taxes and stamping out slave trouble. He's not aware that this vault exists."

"Are you sure he won't walk in on us?" Rouzey asked anxiously.

"Dead certain." Nitti turned his head and made sure that Stobber had locked the door.

"All right," Rouzey said. "Let's see your treasure."

NITTI swung the door open, and the light of the outer room glanced over the surfaces of gold and emerald and sapphire. The light also struck full in the face of Joe.

"Ya-a-yaki-ying-yang!" Rouzey's immense chest shuddered like a wounded animal, and his copper gong throat gave out a wild series of notes. "The—the king!" he backed away.

"Nonsense!" Nitti said huffily and started to walk in. He came in with a gun, and it was pointed in the only direction a gun could point in such a small narrow room. It would flash a ray straight through Joe's chest if he pulled the trigger. "Nonsense. I tell you the king is—"

Nitti's elbows gave a backward jerk and his narrowed eyes suddenly opened as if they meant to jump out of their sockets.

Joe jumped back, too. He bumped against the wall. He reached for a handful of the coins and gems. The only defense he could think of was to throw the stuff square at Nitti.

He threw wild. There was a clang and a clatter and a spray of treasure through the door. It went wild because Joe wasn't fully under his own control. The vine still had him. And as he threw, **the vine lifted him.**

Click! Blaze! The stream of silver fire shot in from the ray pistol in Nitti's hand. Straight at Joe.

But the lavender vine caught if first and it splashed off. Invisible though the vine was, it was around him, holding. And no ray could penetrate. Yes, Pudgy had told him that once before, and now he was seeing it.

He was rising. Into the ceiling. How much had Nitti seen? Nitti was looking around blankly.

"There's no one in there," Nitti was saying with vast confidence. "Not a soul." He pocketed his gun.

"I swear I saw the king," Rouzey said, coming back to the door.

"Optical illusion," said Nitti, looking as pale as white gold. "You can see for yourself no one's there."

"What made that stuff come flying out?" Rouzey grated.

"Oh, that? That always happens when we open the door. Dust combustion. Isn't that right, Stobber?"

Joe heard Stobber give an irritated cough. "Sure, it always happens. Er—excuse me, Nitti, I'm going down just to make sure the king's still where we think he is."

Then Joe was going up again, and the opening through the palace roof was closing after him. He'd have to tell Pudgy about this one. But, by the stars and comets, he was going to think twice before he made another wish that the lavender vine might jump at!

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CHAPTER XXI

ACROSS the brown and green valley toward the western edge of the kingdom, the battle had begun.

It began as many civil wars begin —with a trifling incident between citizens and authorities.

A tradesman was confronted by one of the Sashes and asked to give certain information which he didn't possess. The Sash had been drinking, contrary to court regulations, and he forgot that he wasn't speaking to a slave. He grew arrogant when the tradesman couldn't answer him, and struck the fellow across the hand with a whip. The tradesman turned on him and threatened to strike him. The Sash gave him two more lashes, and by that time a crowd had begun to gather. People weren't used to seeing this law-abiding tradesman in trouble.

"Don't strike back," someone yelled at him. But the tradesman was seeing red. He picked up a nearby carpenter's tool—a mallet— and struck the Sash on the side of the head.

Two more Sashes came up to establish order, but a score of townsmen had already rushed to the defense of their friend, and the battle was on.

Seven persons, including two women, were sliced through with ray fire, and that threw the battle wide open. The town's alarm bells rang. People came running from all surrounding neighborhoods. When certain slave masters refused to join the mob, the townsmen pushed them into the street, toward the barricade of vehicles that the Sashes had hastily put together.

By evening, the ringleaders of the fight against the Sashes were joining other rebel groups in neighboring

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Everywhere the battle cry was the same: "The king is with us—he's fighting Nitticello!".

towns.

In most villages the officials rode up and down the streets shouting frantically from loud speakers for everyone to go home and stay there, and not to join the outbreak. But that couldn't stop the tide. The dam had burst.

When morning came, Nadoff led an advance through the streets of Redroot Hill. Eight hundred slaves dropped their jobs and joined the march.

They moved eastward. It was a badly organized army, almost entirely without firearms. The slaves picked up clubs along the way, or brought pitchforks, or gathered sackfuls of rocks. Some of the townsmen carried ray pistols. A few of them had cars. The cars moved slowly, and the marching army accompanied them. They were moving toward the palace at the other side of the kingdom.

That forenoon they were attacked by the air spinners from the king's arsenal.

The air spinners were deadly. They would fly low and spray ray guns over the motorcade. A few attacks left the cars crippled and useless. And there were casualties.

But the rebels had by this time taken to the groves of trees, both below the ridge road and above it. And they kept making progress, not backward but forward.

"It's Nitti's neck or ours!"

That was the battle cry. Lucky, Joe thought, that they could forgive the king and vent their wrath on the prime minister. But gradually the rumor was getting around. **The king was on their side!**

"He's one of us," the slaves were saying. "He's incognito. Yes, he's marching with us. And he's going to fight Nitti to a showdown."

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"But he's always been in favor of slavery," others would protest.

"Not any more. He's been a slave himself the last few days and now he knows what it's like."

"Then why doesn't he just abolish it, if he's the king?"

"Because he almost got himself abolished the other day, in the execution chair. Nitti ran a double in on him and meant to kill him before he could become powerful. But the double got wise and stopped the deal just in time."

THE rumors were racing around like wildfire. Everything that was said lifted the spirits of the marching men. Somewhere among them there was a king, wearing slave clothes, marching in a mob against the evils of his own land!

Joe had been with the group from the first hour of the battle. He too had discarded his kingly clothes in favor of a slave outfit. But he carried a bunble containing a blue uniform with gold epaulettes, just in case. Also a trim mustache and a spade shaped beard that might be added to his make-up at a moment's notice.

By the second morning he found Marcia, traveling in one of the rebel cars with a family. The woman who was driving was the Karridonzan girl whose voice he had heard while down in the shaft of the lavender vine.

"You'll have to leave the car," Joe advised, stopping them on the ridge road at daybreak. He and the king had been helping Nadoff keep watch the latter part of the night.

"Joe!" Marcia exclaimed. "You're with us, aren't you! Of course you are."

"No time to talk," Joe snapped. "Drive into the thicket if you want to save the car. There'll be air spinners over us before the sun shows—"

The sun was coming up, again shrouded by a network of lavender vine hanging above the mist. And a moment later the air spinners were seen rising into the sky.

Joe jumped into the car. The girl let him take the controls. He shot ahead over the road and then swung down over the ridge through a break in the wooded slope. The car jumped a ravine, careened, righted itself and plunged deep into the darkness of the woods. Another ravine was ahead, too deep to cross. The girl screamed.

"Stop, Joe!" Marcia cried.

Joe jammed the brakes. He was crashing against branches. But there was a ravine, and that was what he wanted. He steered into it, and the car jerked and clunked to a stop.

He swung the door open.

"Quick! Under the car, everybody!"

It was a fast scramble. Marcia was beside him, and the girl, and the others. Now the ray fire was slicing the tree-tops away. The air spinner went past in a hurry, and all along the line you heard the swish, crash, clunk—tree tops falling.

Everyone along the ridge had ducked for the lowest point. The luckiest ones were protected, as Marcia and her party were, from things that fell from overhead.

"Here they come back!" Joe warned. "Stay where you are."

"Joe," Marcia was holding tight to his arm. He caught her hand.

"They're not going to get us, pal," Joe said. "Or if they do, the rest of the army will keep right on going."

"I'm not scared," she said, "I just wanted to say, thanks for coming."

The air spinners found a part of the band that morning and there were some severe losses. But the rebel army was still marching when night

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came, and everywhere it was gathering more recruits.

"It's Nitti's neck or ours," was the hushed battle cry.

By this time the king's identity was known. It was King Arvo himself who started the story that they couldn't lose this rebellion because the kings were already on their side—not one king but two. And then Joe, the American slave, became known as the "king" who had saved the real king from Nitti's assassination scheme.

"And it was the American girl's jewels that bought our dinner tonight," some of the self-appointed captains announced as the rebel throngs passed the supply cars to be served their midnight dinners.

THE searchlights from three air spinners played over the valley, trying to locate their camp. Once a bright beam swept over Joe and the inner circle that were gathered around Nadoff. The flash of the king's blue uniform with the gold trimmings showed for just an instant. Joe had turned the uniform over to him and, with Nadoff's consent, the king had restored himself to his original appearance. A careful shave, after several days of growing whiskers, had brought back the trim pattern of his mustache and beard. He looked fine, Joe thought—more regal than ever. And the passing searchlight gave Joe a reassuring glimpse. Here was a moment of danger, but there was new strength in the king's face.

"You may be right about Arvo," Joe whispered to Marcia. "He may possess the qualities that Karridonza needs in a king."

"I hope he'll have another chance."

"Has it occurred to you, Marcia that he might need the strength of a good woman at his side? Karridonza could use a beautiful queen like you."

Joe tried to read her expression by starlight. Her answer evaded him. There was some work she must attend to, helping the other women with the food supplies. "If you'll excuse me, please, Joe. . . We'll see each other again before we reach the palace."

A little later that night Joe and King Arvo got their heads together, and with Nadoff's consent, they called for the lavender vine.

Like a stationary bolt of lightning skirting the tops of the trees, it came into view—deep purple turning to blue and then to a brilliant lavender. It was less than half a mile away. Arvo said he hoped no one was under it. Joe saw that he was terribly hurt over the way it had caused chance disasters.

"When it flows over the country on an errand, I'm always afraid it will strike some innocent victims."

"That's what happened the first two nights I saw it," said Joe. "But after that, the frog boy and I began to use it without any such trouble. I don't understand it."

"There are lots of secrets in controlling it," the king said. "If we're going to make use of it, we've got to work together—you and I—and all the rest. We've got to wish for the same thing."

"That should be easy," Nadoff said. "What we all want is a showdown with Nitticello."

"If you'll call the leaders together," King Arvo said, "I'll reveal what I know about handling the vine. Then, if we have good luck, it may move over to the ridge and pick us up bodily and take us right to the palace door. We'll turn our march into a ride."

The vine was moving slowly now, coming closer, but moving uncertainly. It was near enough that Joe could

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see the flow of light through the trunk and out into the undulating branches. There was a huge claw tonight, as there had been the night it had picked him up at the wrecked air spinner. Joe shuddered. After all the amazingly delightful rides he had taken, he shouldn't have any fears. But there was an angry look about the claw. Gigantic fingers of light.

"It could strike down a hundred Sashes," someone had said hopefully at its first appearance. But now that same observer was saying, "It could slap down a thousand slaves."

A tremble of panic was going through the rebel army. Joe wondered whether it had been a mistake to call the vine into service.

The leaders gathered close around Nadoff and the king and Joe. It was a moment of King Arvo to prove that he was willing to share his deepest secrets.

THE king began. It wasn't easy to give away a secret, he said, if the secret was so complicated that one had to live with it and work with it before he knew it intimately himself.

He explained that the rash acts and unaccountable deaths caused by the vine could be attributed, he believed, to the fact that he and Nitticello were not in harmony.

"Our wishes were never in balance," Arvo said. "Although I have made many mistakes, I know that my greatest mistake was that of yielding to Nitticello. When he tried to command the vine, his wishes were always more selfish than mine. And that always made the vine jump angrily."

"It looks angry tonight," Joe said.

The crowd, standing in the darkness, their faces dimly lighted by the flare of lavender, kept turning to watch. The vine was moving around them gradually.

"Better hurry," Nadoff said. "Tell us what to do."

"I can't hurry," Arvo said, "because the vine isn't ready for a command—not until all of you understand. You see, the vine knows us. It's a power in our lives. And what does it do to us? Here is the secret: **It gives back to us what we give to others.**"

The king paused. There were little whispered comments. Then deep silence. The king continued.

"For you who give your neighbors kindliness, the vine will give back kindliness. Sometimes the return gift takes a freakish form. A little boy at the court who was always playing mischief upon others received a gift of mischief from the vine. It gave him some of the characteristics of a frog.

"This American slave who helped us out of the mud—who gave us a lift—has been given many a lift by the vine. Am I right, Joe Peterson?"

"Y-yes! So that's it. I'm beginning to understand these favors. But go on. What about this business of being susceptible to change? The frog-boy was telling me—"

"That's very important for us to know. If the vine lifts us, as we hope, and takes us to the door of the palace so we can have our showdown with Nitticello, there'll be a crucial hour for everyone of us. After being in the hands of the vine, our natures are ready to bend more easily than at other times. The frog-boy received his frog nature when he played in the swamp after a ride in the vine. And my friend, Joe Peterson, confesses that he felt himself turning into a king—almost—as the result of a secret wish that was strong in him after a ride in the vine."

"Then what are we to wish?" Na-

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doff asked.

"If the vine will engulf us, we'll descend from it wishing that we may all be proud, honest citizens —— and free."

"It's coming," someone shouted.

"Don't be afraid," Arvo called out. "Ascend the ridge and wait. And wish, first of all, for a showdown with Nitti."

Joe joined the hike, trying to keep an eye on Arvo. He was proud of the things Arvo had said. And he couldn't help being a little jealous, too. For Marcia was right, this king had the qualities that Karridonza needed. If he succeeded in making a comeback —and if he was in love with Marcia —how could Joe stand in the way of her becoming his queen?

They were gathered on the ridge, under the stars. The angry edged fingers of the vine began to hop swiftly back and forth through a half mile semi-circle.

"Wish!" the king called.

"We're wishing!" came a score of responses.

To Joe's utter amazement, the vine began to retreat. It struck off across the Karridonzan valley like a runaway.

"Where's it going?"

"It will come back," the king said confidently. "It's never been known to cross the purple mists."

But as they watched, Joe saw that it did cross the mists. It went out of sight on the distant horizon, in the direction of the skystation.

For a long moment they watched in silence. Then Nadoff said, "We'd better get back into the woods. It will soon be daylight, and some air spinner will catch us here."

"No, we'll wait here," King Arvo said quietly. "Keep wishing."

CHAPTER XXII

JOE thought King Arvo had lost everything. Nadoff started down the slope, and as the word spread to the rest of the group, Joe knew that they were all going to leave.

"Seevia. . . Seevia. . ."

"It's coming back!" Joe shouted. "Stay with us! It's coming!"

Nadoff turned. Everyone could see it now. They waited, wishing.

"Seevia. . . Seevia. . . Seevia. . ." The king's chant was lost in the excited jumble of voices. Yes, it was whirling back like a luminous inverted twister. There was angry power, Joe thought. It whipped over the purple mist, it raced down into the valley, it leaped over villages.

The fingers weren't visible. Perhaps they were lost in the whirl; or they were transparent in the early morning sunlight. But many branches could be seen, flaring out like lightning, then jumping back to spin around the central stem.

"It's bringing something!" King Arvo shouted. "It's bringing something big!"

Within a mile of them it slowed its pace. Now it glided over the ground between them and the fortress.

It guided them on. King Arvo and Nadoff were in solid agreement: They should follow it. They should use it as a smoke screen. The rays couldn't penetrate the lavender vine, Joe knew. And now it was everyone's secret.

"Follow the vine! It's leading us!"

It didn't happen suddenly, as Joe and many others had hoped. It was a long, tedious two-hour march, even with the vine's protection against the rays. For no one succeeded in getting into the vine until it had come to rest within two hundred yards of the palace.

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But through those two hours of marching, it continually screened them. And three times it shot out an angry arm at the approaching air spinners. The spinners whirled about and tried again. Flash! One of them went down, and there was a crash and a flare of fire. The other two sped away in search of a healthier climate.

"The vine is still carrying something," Arvo kept repeating. "It must have picked up something big on the other side of the mists."

The palace ray guns were slicing the earth from the top of the ridge on either side of the lavender vine. The air was streaked with red and silver lines. Stobber and his Sashes were making it hot for them now. They moved ahead under difficulties. Tree tops jumped. Hilltops leaped from their bases. Sprays of dirt bounced and fell; but through the clouds of dust the rebel army advanced.

"Keep back of the vine!" Nadoff yelled. "Watch it! It's going over the ridge."

Joe bounded over the ridge, then stopped, crouching, while the hundreds of others rushed up to take a new position. Those rays were quick death for any who couldn't leap fast enough. And a few of them got it, every time the vine swerved for a new position. He was glad he had persuaded Marcia to remain hidden with the women at the night's camp. If the palace could be captured, he knew that she and the others would soon be there.

"It's going to drop its load," King Arvo yelled. "Keep back."

The huge twisted lavender stem was so large that its vibrating roots covered half of the two hundred yards that now separated the ridge from the palace. It was settling down, a massive cylinder of light, right at the edge of the execution grounds.

There it deposited its load — a building.

It was the handsome new skyscraper from the Karridonza skystation! The vine had picked up the building in one piece and carried it back **to transplant it.**

Joe watched the lavender fingers cut away the ground; he saw the swirling trunk exert its mighty pressure as the building settled down into place. No ray could touch it. The swirl of lavender grew thinner, but it was still there, spiraling its screen of safety. Under the forenoon sun it showed as a thin pinkish haze. The white building within its whirl reflected its tinted light.

"Now!" King Arvo cried. "Into the vine! It's all yours. Your fortress. Come on, come on!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE rebel army flowed into the building. It was a godsend and they knew it. They filled its lobby, clamoring for orders. What next? How would they proceed with their attack?

Nadoff held his head. The clamor was too much for him. The slaves were racing from one room to another, jubilant. They shouted with joy, as if the victory had already been won. They had given many a roof to Karridonza. And the lavender vine was returning the favor. It was theirs —this beautiful building! And it was wonderful!

Joe tried to shout them down.

"Quiet, you wild men! You're in danger! The vine won't stay here long. As soon as it goes, the ray guns will chop this structure right down to the ground! Quiet! Quiet!"

Nadoff found the king and put a

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microphone before him. The loud speaker silenced the shouting.

"Listen to me!" Arvo commanded. "This is a surprise on all of us. We didn't ask for it. It just came. All we asked for was a showdown with Nitticello and his defenders. And we know they are in the palace, with all of the weapons of the fortress at their command. Why the lavender vine brought us this building from the sky station we don't know. But the vine is on our side. And as long as it doesn't leave us exposed to the rays, this is our fortress."

The rebel army cheered. Joe shuddered. They were feeling too confident.

"Now," King Arvo called, "Nadoff and I have a plan. We'll send four squads from four directions to break into the palace and kidnap Nitti. If we can bring him back, we'll make him radio across to Stobber and the ray gunners—"

King Arvo's speech was interrupted by a cry from the wide curved stairs in one corner of the wide lobby.

"Nitti is here. In the building. I saw him!"

It was a girl's voice—Marcia Melinda's! Yes, it was she, disguised as a townsman. She had marched with the rebel army after all.

"Where did you see him?" Arvo shouted.

"He was up here on the balcony the minute we entered. He ran up to the next floor. I followed him to be sure. He ran on up the stairs, looking for a place to hide."

So the vine had answered the wish! Joe saw it plainly now. They had wanted a showdown with Nitti. But Nitti wasn't at the palace. He had chased off to the skystation to buy the headquarters he needed for his big deal. But the vine had gone after him. It had cleared the building of everyone but Nitti, and then it had lifted him—building and all—and brought him back to face the rebel army.

"Come down from there, Marcia Melinda!" the king cried. He was breaking a path through the mob, marching toward the stairs. Joe was beating a trail in the same direction.

Ahead of them, eighteen or twenty slaves bounded up the curved stairway waving clubs and knives. They meant to find Nitti.

"No!" King Arvo shouted. "This is my fight. Come back!"

No one noticed whether they obeyed or not, for at that moment a volley of shots sounded from the other side of the lobby. The Sashes were pouring in!

From then on, it was a free fight. Clubs and knives and pitchforks against whips, knives and ray pistols. Only the pistols wouldn't work! The Sashes moved in, intending to mow the rebel army down with a scythe of ray fire. But they were in the vine. The guns were dead. The Sashes discovered this fact and they started to back away. The wide entrance jammed. Other Sashes were pushing in from behind. The plan for a quick devastating attack was fouling up.

Clang! Clack! Clatter! The Sashes were suddenly throwing their pistols right and left. Then they pushed in with swords and whips.

NADOFF caught the signal from King Arvo. He climbed to a shelf in the wall. He seized a statuette and hurled it at the advancing Sashes. He dodged a flying knife—and he laughed in the faces of his enemy.

The ring of Nadoff's laugh was enough to make his slave followers rush into the fray with death. Clang! Crash! Thump! The fury resounded

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through the wide marble-walled lobby.

Joe struck down three Sashes on his way to the stairs. He wanted Nitti. Nitti's thousands of crimes pounded through his mind. The inexcusable beatings. The constant robberies. The interplanetary plot. Murders and murders—and the near murders that had been foiled only by fate. . .Arvo and Marcia!

Where was Marcia!

She must have led a squad of slaves up the stairs to find Nitti!

Joe reached the balcony. He raced up the next flight. Three slaves lay in the corridor. Two were dying. The third, clutching his arm, was writhing in pain.

"Nitti?" Joe cried.

"He's got a needle!" the slave groaned.

Another flight. Two more casualties on the stairs. Then Nitti—and Marcia!

The prime minister was having a murder spree. You could see it in the hunch of his shoulders. He had trapped his favorite victim at the end of the corridor. He was moving toward her, clasping the needle, making ready.

Marcia's eyes were wide with terror. She might have screamed—or maybe she couldn't!

At the sound of Joe's running steps he whirled. Joe plunged for him. He swung with the needle. Joe caught his arm and threw it wide. The needle jammed into the wall. Then Joe tore into him with a tackle that spun the two of them to the floor.

The prime minister was no match for Joe, and it might have ended there if Marcia Melinda hadn't rushed into the fray armed with a short heavy wooden club. Marcia swung just as her target fell. The blow missed Nitti but caught Joe across the side of the head. He saw dancing comets.

"Joe! Oh, Joe! Come out of it. He's getting away!"

The girl was slapping his cheeks. He stared. The floor and walls were still weaving, but he knew he had to get to his feet.

"Did he get you?" Joe mumbled.

"No. I'm all right. But if you hadn't come—" She was breathless, tugging at his arm. He came up blinking. The needle was still in the wall. What of Nitti?

"Quick! This way!" Marcia cried. "He's trying the next stairs up. But the door's solid. It's locked. I tried. Quick, we can catch him."

Nitti had already found his way blocked. Now he dodged back into the corridor. His eyes flashed white at Joe. He wasn't going to chance another encounter. He reversed his course and took the stairs down.

The chase was on. Back and forth and down another flight. Over the bodies of Nitti's victims and down another. Down the last curving stairs toward the lobby. Joe was right at his heels, Marcia following.

Strangely, the free-for-all in the lobby had come to a dead stop. For an instant Joe couldn't understand why. Sashes and rebels alike were staring at the high lobby ceiling as if hypnotized. Then Joe saw. The hazy lavender light had thickened along the upper walls and gathered into a clearly visible claw overhead.

Fingers of the vine! They glowed with a ghastly pink light. They were curved like immense steel hooks. The back of the lavender hand moved slowly beneath the ceiling. The great fingers twitched as if ready to pounce.

UNDER this spell it was no wonder that the whole roomful of

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chaos had frozen into a tableau of terror. Nitti, catching the threat, stopped abruptly on the last step. Joe and Marcia held back, and Joe's heart skipped a thump as he gauged the anger in the hovering vine. But there was Nitti. Joe moved down the steps slowly, his fists tight.

"No, Joe!" Marcia called.

Everyone in the lobby heard. Everyone saw what she did. For a quick moment her action stung Joe. Then he knew that she was right. She tossed her club out into the lobby toward a figure in a regal blue uniform with gold epaulettes.

"To his majesty, King Arvo!" She sang out the challenge, and every Sash and rebel and slave understood.

Joe saw Arvo's eyes flash as he caught the club out of the air. The lavender hand held back. The lobby made way for him. He moved toward Nitti.

Nitti stood on the bottom step, club in hand, waiting. Then his arms folded with that wonderful poise of his, and Joe saw his face tighten with the old lines of arrogance.

"Your majesty!" Nitti said, giving a slight bow. "You've made a serious mistake. But I can help you out of it."

"I've made no mistake this time," Arvo said through clenched teeth. He came on. His steps were measured.

But Nitti meant to play the old game of arguing him out of his purpose. "Don't do anything you'll regret Arvo. Let's talk this over." That smooth line, Joe thought. Would it work?

"No regrets," said Arvo. "I'm going to beat the life out of you, Nitticello, and there'll be no regrets."

"Wait, Arvo. Your majesty!" Terror broke the prime minister's voice. "If you've got grievances, I'll listen. Don't be a beast!"

"The people of Karridonza may judge who is a beast!"

No rebel could have marched against a foe with a more convincing show of righteous indignation. Arvo raised his club to strike. And Joe was proud of him; for Joe knew that if Arvo lived through this fight he would never be bluffed out again, never.

The club was ready to swing when Nitti screeched, "Look out! The vine!"

It might have been a last trick, but it wasn't. Joe saw the angry fingers swoop down from the ceiling. They pierced down between the king and Nitti. They stiffened. They glided toward Nitti. He backed away. The fingers followed—and Arvo followed—and after him came the whole lobby full of rebels and Sashes, determined to see this clash to the finish.

The fingers forced the prime minister out the door. It was a moving drama followed by an audience that was virtually hypnotized.

"Let them fight it out!"

Joe didn't realize he had said it aloud until he caught the nod of agreement from Marcia. If wishes could have controlled the vine in that tense moment, the king would surely have had his chance to put a quick end to the kingdom's oppressor.

And he meant to. He bit his words savagely. "You can't escape me now, Nitticello. The vine's on my side."

Nitti flung back, "you're lying. The vine is protecting me. It's always protected me. I know the secrets."

"Then you know that the vine gives back what you give to others." Arvo advanced into the sunshine. The thin fingers of lavender still separated them as Nitti backed away. "What have you given to others, Nitticello? Death. The vine will give it back to

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you."

IT was the thick surly voice of Stobber, chief of the Sashes, that shouted an obscene taunt in answer to the king's words. Joe hadn't seen him, but he must have been waiting on the outside of the building, directing his Sashes from a position of safety. Now he stepped into the opening in front of the crowd and began shooting.

He shot into the group indiscriminately, and cut a swath of death through the foreranks of the rebels. **The ray pistol—it was working!** Now that the vine had gathered into a claw it had left a space beneath. A space for pistol fire, unguarded!

Nine slaves and townsmen melted away under Stobber's quick blast. Nadoff fell, but Joe thought the fire missed him. The Sashes were electrified by the act. Pistols would work again. There would have been an instantaneous stampede for discarded pistols if, in that split second, the lavender vine hadn't taken the violence in its own angry hands.

The claw of the vine leaped and seized Stobber. It caught him by the handsome green and orange mane over the top of his head and lifted him off the ground. The ray gun went dead.

"Stobber!" Nitti cried. The vine's fingers no longer protected him, and the king was after him. "Stobber! Help me, Stobber! **Save me!**"

Stobber was being lifted, and Nitti ran to him and grabbed his feet and tried to pull him down. The claw of the vine was rising. Nitti held on. He was kicking but he was afraid to let go. He **couldn't** let go, Joe thought. The vine had both of them.

The two of them were carried over the king's station in the center of the execution grounds, and Nitti's dangling feet kicked the switches and tripped against the red handle at the upper end of the blue metal bar. Joe wondered if any of the red came off on Nitti's boot.

A moment later the claw lowered. The two men in its grip, swaying like a pendulum, went down into the disintegration machine.

The invisible walls of disintegration moved in from both sides and sliced away at the human pendulum. The crowd hushed. Everyone saw what was happening. Nitti and Stobber dissolved swiftly. Within a minute or two there was nothing left but the crest of Stobber's skull with the green and orange mane—the handle by which he had been held.

This remaining bit of Stobber was still caught in the vine's grip as the whole tower of lavender light rose slowly and drifted up into the sunshine—over the ridge and out across the valley. When Joe last saw it, the vine appeared to be lowering and dissolving above the marshes.

"That clinches it for Arvo," Joe whispered to Marcia as they watched in awe from the edge of the crowd.

"Yes," Marcia siad, "He's won his right to be king."

"He's won his right to practically anything he wants," Joe said stonily, not looking at Marcia. . . .

CHAPTER XXIV

A few hours later King Arvo stood at the window of one of his palace rooms, talking into the telephone. His prime minister had called.

"Prime Minister Nadoff speaking."

"Are you getting settled, Nadoff?"

"I'm already feeling much at home in my new office, your majesty."

Arvo looked across the grounds to

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the new skyscraper less than a hundred yards distant. The building had recently been purchased with the king's funds, Arvo had learned, and although the late Nitticello hadn't planned that it would be moved into the shadow of the king's fortress, here it was, and here it would stay. Arvo could see the round form of Nadoff in one of the upper story windows, telephoning from his new prime minister's quarters.

"Have you prepared the statement along the lines I suggested?" Arvo asked.

"I have it outlined, your majesty. One, abolish all slavery. Two, comb the Sashes for loyalty; retain the best, try the others, and purge the worst. Three, refill the ranks with the worthiest of ex-slaves. Four, assure the kingdom that the lavender vine will never again strike recklessly."

"Good enough," said Arvo. "I'll check with you on the details."

"I beg to report, your majesty, that my first official caller was the frog-boy."

"Pudgy? What did he want?"

"He wishes to offer the palace a souvenir as a symbol of his good will. He brought the green and orange mane of Stobber which he found in the swamp."

King Arvo chuckled. "All right. We'll accept. In fact, we'll grant him a favor in return. Is there anything he wants?"

"He hopes he may join the chants around the nine lanterns without being beaten for it."

King Arvo considered. Some of the rebels had rumored the news that they had seen a kicking pair of green legs up in the lavender vine during the hours of the battle.

"Grant him his wish, Nadoff. And tell him also that we'll add a tenth lantern in the row in his special honor. Is he there now?"

Nadoff said he wasn't; the fact was, he had disappeared quite mysteriously a moment after the conference.

"Never mind," Arvo said, "I think he already knows our decision." For Arvo had just seen a pair of large green eyes peeking around one of the marble pillars, and now he heard a little froggish chortle from that direction.

"There's another matter of business that should come to your attention, your majesty. I find that one of your former court guests is quite anxious to return to her native planet. A beautiful earth girl by the name of—"

"Marcia!" Arvo breathed. "Yes, of course."

"I discouraged her," said Nadoff, "first on the grounds that she has had a part in our recent troubles—"

"We'll consider that settled."

"And second, on the grounds that you might possibly have a plan for her—or am I presuming too much?"

"Please send her to me at once," Arvo said. "I want to talk with her personally."

He made another call to an attendant to check certain arrangements relating to Marcia's visit. When she arrived, he welcomed her into a conference room.

"So you wish to go back to your native planet, Miss Melinda—Marcia?"

"Yes, your majesty—Arvo."

HE handed her a small ivory jewel box. She opened it, and it contained a lovely string of pearls. "You'll accept them, with the compliments of Karridonza?"

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 142)

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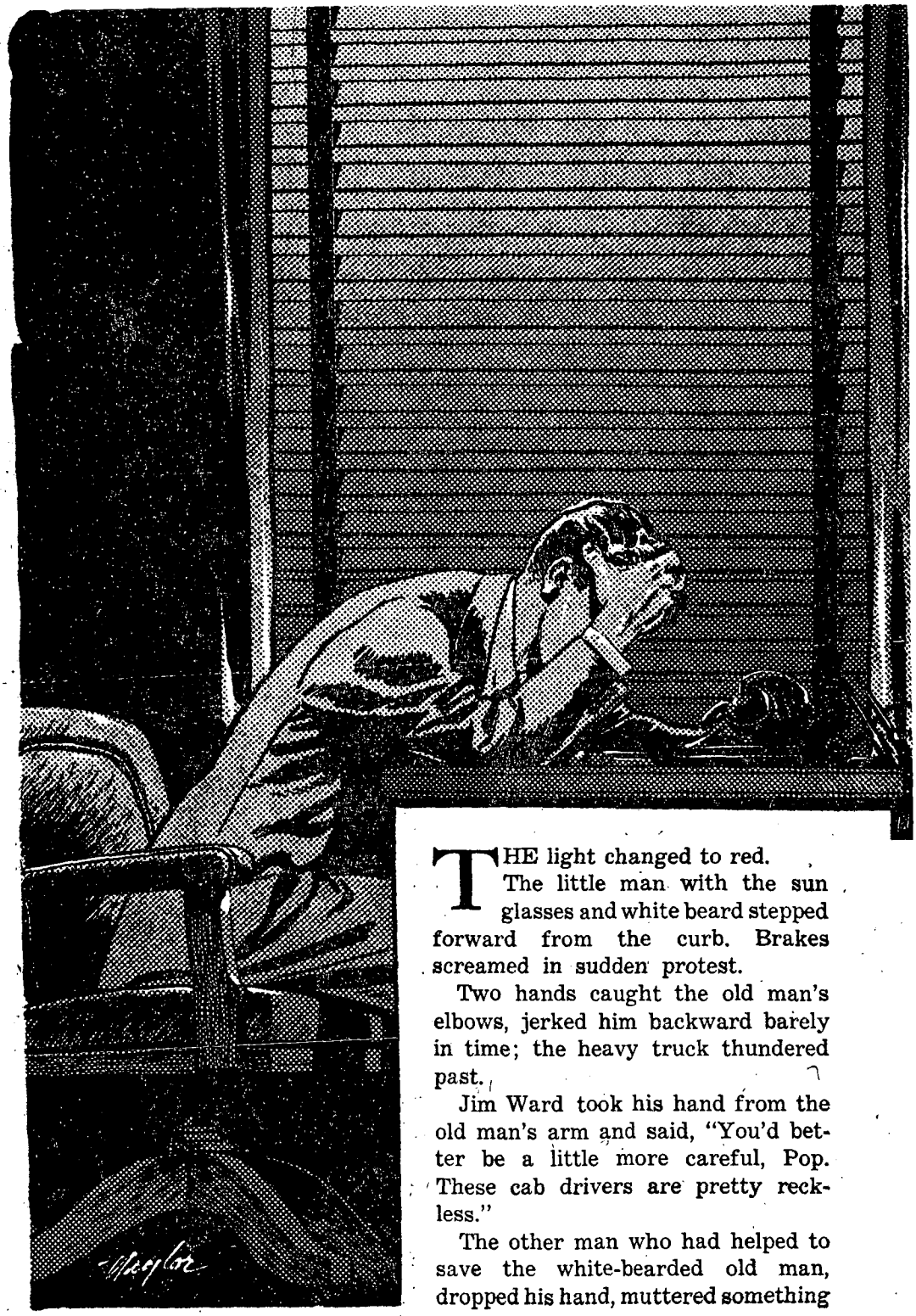

THE light changed to red.

The little man with the sun glasses and white beard stepped forward from the curb. Brakes screamed in sudden protest.

Two hands caught the old man's elbows, jerked him backward barely in time; the heavy truck thundered past.

Jim Ward took his hand from the old man's arm and said, "You'd better be a little more careful, Pop. These cab drivers are pretty reckless."

The other man who had helped to save the white-bearded old man, dropped his hand, muttered something

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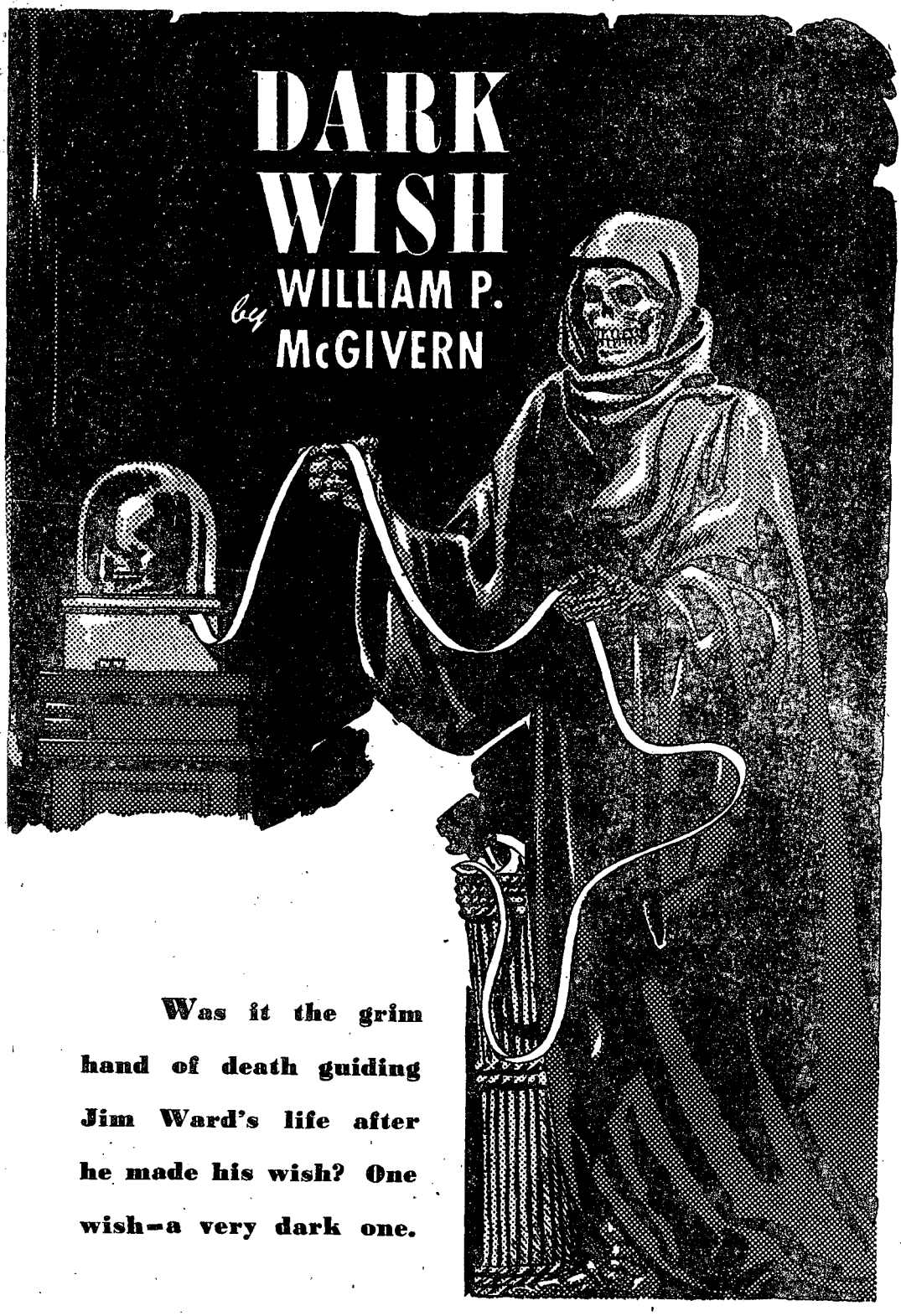
DARK WISH

by WILLIAM P. McGIVERN



Was it the grim hand of death guiding Jim Ward's life after he made his wish? One wish—a very dark one.

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that sounded profane. He was a big man about sixty and everything about him, from his flushed, well-barbered face to his Chesterfield overcoat looked like important money.

"I—I must thank you both," the old man said, a trifle breathlessly. "I forgot myself and didn't think."

He smiled shyly at Jim Ward, then at the impressive man in the Chesterfield. "You have done me a great service. Perhaps I can repay you in some small way. Would you be good enough to tell me what it is you desire?"

Jim Ward was watching the light; already he had forgotten the little old man. He was late for work and unless he hurried he'd be still later. Under his arm he carried a manila envelope and in it were blueprints the head of his firm needed that morning.

"That's all right," he said, absently. "Lucky thing we were here. Just be careful from now on."

The little man bowed, a curious, old world bow and then straightened and still smiling shyly, turned to the man in the Chesterfield. "You, sir, may I assist you to something you desire particularly?

"Eh? The man stared at him blankly. Then, remembering, he said: "Watch where youre going after this. Thats the trouble with driving today. Too many jay-walkers out. Nobody knows where the hell they're going. Trouble with the whole country. Everybody going in circles." He was talking to himself more than to the shyly smiling little man. His face had flushed and his white mustaches seemed to bristle. "Just be careful, use your head a little. The whole country would be better off if people thought once for every fifty times they acted."

The warning orange light flashed.

The little man sighed sadly. "I will try, he said. "And for you both I will grant a wish. Any wish you like as long as it harms no one else. Please, be wise and careful."

Jim Ward heard the words and they surprised him; but the green light flashed and with a muttered goodbye, he started across the street. When he reached his office and delivered the prints to his employer, who was fortunately a bit late also, he had forgotten the incident. . . .

THAT night his wife, Rita, met him at the door as usual, but there was something lacking in her usual welcoming smile. Over dinner, which was excellent, he asked her if anything was wrong.

"I've been a little worried today," she said. She looked down at her plate and he noticed she was blushing. She was a pretty girl, with dark red hair, flawless skin and deep violet eyes. The touch of color in her cheeks now was very becoming.

"Whats up?

"I've been going over the house accounts and bills, she said. "There just seems no way to stretch the money, Jim."

He ate in silence for a while, troubled. Prices were going up every day, but salaries, particularly in the white collar brackets, were not keeping pace. Finally he said, "I know its tough on you, baby. But we can cut down on a few things here and there and make out all right. We've still got enough to get along on comfortably."

"Theres enough for us, of course," she said, staring down at her place.

"Well who else have we got to worry about? he asked with surprise.

"Did you think it would always be just you and me in this family?"

He grinned. "Of course not. When

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things are right we'll have a baby. Maybe a whole houseful of them, but thats beside the point right—" He stopped, stared at her. The blush on her cheeks, her shy smile, the sudden worry about money all had a new significance. He put his knife down carefully.

"You mean. . ."

"Yes. . ."

For a moment he was silent, almost hushed. Then he said, "Great jumping catfish!"

His wife jumped up from the table and ran into the front room crying. Throwing herself on the couch, she buried her face in a pillow, shoulders shaking uncontrollably.

Jim hurried to her side. "Don't cry, baby. Please don't. It's all right, everythings wonderful. You — you just surprised me."

"I wouldn't have told you if I'd known you were going to be upset," she said, her voice muffled by the pillow.

"Now, now," he said. "It's wonderful. He thought about it a moment and it did seem wonderful. "Me, a father," he said, reverently.

Rita sat up after a while and let him dry her eyes with the corner of her handkerchief. "We'll get along all right," he said.

"We can cut down on everything else," she said. "No shows, no nights out, no steaks."

"You've got to have your strength," he said.

He lit a cigarette and tried to look at the whole situation objectively. He made forty-two dollars a week. Their monthly rent was fifty-five and that was going to be raised shortly. That would take a week and half's salary. With food and carfare there just wasn't going to be much left. He decided he could take his lunch and save thirty-five cents a day, and maybe there might be a raise when he let the boss know he was having an addition to his family.

He hated to skimp, particularly where Rita was concerned. He wanted to give her the best and not worry her about money; but he was caught in a tight spot and there was little he could do to help.

They talked about their plans then for a full hour. They decided they could make it, but just barely. There wasn't going to be a margin for sickness, or recreation.

Their grave discussion was interrupted by the ringing of the doorbell. Jim glanced at Rita inquiringly. "Expecting anyone?"

"Why, no."

The bell rang again, insistently.

Jim pressed the buzzer that released the door in the vestibule of the building. Then he opened the door of their apartment and stepped out on the landing.

He heard someone coming up the stairs quickly, panting loudly with the effort.

"Jim Ward?" a vaguely familiar voice said excitedly.

"Yes, that's right. Who it it?"

"I've got to talk with you. It's terribly important."

The man turned the last corner and started up to Jim's landing. He was a big man, with white hair and flushed face. He wore a chesterfield overcoat and a black homburg. He looked upset and excited, but still important.

"Young man, my name is Matthew Morgan," he said, speaking very rapidly. "You helped save an old man this morning from crossing in front of a truck. I also helped. That's what I'm here about." He rattled the sentences off with the velocity of a ma-

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chine gun. "He offered us each a wish, remember? Well, he wasn't just making conversation."

"Slow down just a minute," Jim said, smiling. "I remember helping an old man. And now that I think back I remember you. But what's all the business about your wish?"

"Can I come in a minute," Matthew Morgan said, speaking slightly more slowly. "I'll explain everything to your satisfaction."

"Very well," Jim said.

He led him into the living room and introduced Matthew Morgan to his wife.

RITA was obviously impressed by Morgan's air of importance and his clothes. "Won't you take off your coat? And would you like coffee?"

"No, thank you," Morgan said. "I don't want to trouble you any more than necessary. I will take off my coat, however."

He put the chesterfield over the arm of his chair and sat down, still breathing heavily. Rita and Jim sat together on the couch, facing him.

He took a cigar from his pocket and asked Rita if she minded if he smoked. She said of course not.

"Fine." When his cigar was drawing well, he said, "Now you both undoubtedly think I'm crazy, intruding like this. But, believe me, it's important. Now, young man, you do remember that old man we assisted this morning?"

"Yes, but I hadn't thought of it again until just now."

"Jim, what's this all about?" Rita said.

"This gentleman and I were waiting for a light at Adams street this morning. An old fellow with sun glasses and a long white beard almost stepped out in front of a truck. Fortunately we grabbed his elbows in time and pulled him out of the way. He was very grateful. He said something about granting us any wish we disired, but to be careful that it didn't hurt anyone else. I remember it all pretty clearly now. I thought he was a little bit touched."

"Yes, so did I," Matthew Morgan said. "But let me tell you what happened. This evening I went to my club for dinner, my usual custom on Tuesday nights. My doctor has given me a rather strict diet and I saw nothing on the menu I could eat but crackers and milk. So I resigned myself to a very unstimulating meal. However, I couldn't forget that I was very hungry. I had worked hard all day and it seemed unjust that I should have to nibble on crackers and sip milk when inside I felt as if I hadn't eaten for weeks.

"At any rate the waiter brought my dinner. Four large crackers on a sterling plate. A pat of butter. A large crystal goblet of cold milk. I tell you it was enough to make a man weep. I looked at that pitiful food and I said aloud: 'I wish I had a thick, blood-rare steak, covered with mushrooms and dripping with a rich, tangy beefsteak sauce. With that I wish I had duchess potatoes, a small green salad with cammembert cheese and dressing made of oil, sherry and vinegar. And for dessert I want Cherries Jubilee, and then about three cups of strong black coffee and a double pony of cordon bleu brandy."

Morgan Matthews paused and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "I said that aloud," he said, almost whispering now. "And when I looked down at the table everything I asked for was there, waiting for me."

He paused and swallowed audibly.

"Young man, my wish had been

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granted!"

THERE was silence after his words, and Jim looked at Rita with a frown. For an instant he had been tempted to laugh; but there was no doubt that Matthew Morgan was serious. Just as serious as people who imagine they are Napoleon.

"That's very interesting," he finally managed to say. "Ah—did you enjoy your meal?"

"I didn't wait to eat it," Matthew Morgan said. "I was too astounded, too dazed at first. But then I realized what had happened. Now, don't be looking at each other like I'm crazy. I'm telling you the absolute truth."

"I'm sure you are," Rita said tactfully.

"Now, listen to me, both of you," Morgan said. "The first thing I did was to think about that old man and everything he said. I remembered you, too, Jim Ward. My memory is excellent. Thinking back I recalled that you had been carrying a manila envelope under your arm. I also remembered that there was the name of a firm on the upper left corner of the envelope. It was the Ryan Engineering company. I went through the telephone directory, got the number. Of course your office was closed by that time, but I was able to locate the home phone number of Albert Ryan, who turned out to be your employer. From him I got your address."

"But what do you want of me?"

Morgan leaned forward and shook an impressive forefinger at Jim. "Just this. You were also given a wish by the old fellow we saved. Now possibly I imagined that a six course dinner miraculously appeared before me tonight. However, the food was real. The waiters were as astonished as I when they saw it. I tried wishing again for something more valuable, but nothing happened. Great God! I could buy a million meals like that. Anyway, I came to you on the chance that I'm not crazy or imagining things. Possibly you have a wish which can be granted. I don't want you to waste it as I did, young man."

Jim thought it over a while and then glanced at Rita with a smile. "If there's anything to it, it would surely settle our problems, honey. We could wish for enough money to take care of the baby, even send him all the way through college."

"Please don't wish for anything so temporary," Morgan said.

"Jim, I don't like it," Rita said, with a worried frown. "I know we need money, but we're getting along all right. We're happy as we are, and I don't want anything to spoil it."

"Well," Jim said, "There's probably nothing to it, anyway. But a little money certainly won't spoil things for us. Actually that's all we need to be completely happy."

"But it might change things," Rita protested. "Money you work for us is one thing. But having it just dumped into your lap is different."

"The difference is that it's easier to get that way," Jim grinned. "Now, don't be worrying about it, honey. Of course, nothing is going to happen, so don't get excited counting your chickens when we don't even have an egg."

Morgan had listened to their conversation with a grave expression. Now he said: "You might be wondering why I'm here. First, I wasted my wish, but there was no way I could have known any better. However, you know better. Even if it doesn't work, I want to suggest the thing for you to wish for. You don't have to pay any attention to me, of course, but here's the proposition I'm going to make. I'll

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give you fifty thousand dollars in a certified check, if you make a wish which I will suggest. Now if nothing happens the money is yours. If the wish is granted I will let you share in fifty per cent of the profits I can make from the wish. What do you say?"

"You seem pretty convinced something is going to happen, don't you?"

"I'm willing to gamble fifty thousand dollars on it," Morgan said emphatically. "I have the check with me in my pocket. You can see for yourself that it's as negotiable as a fifty thousand dollar bill. You'll have that much, even if it turns out I was mistaken or deluded. And if your wish is granted well, young man, I'll make profits that will make you smile at a mere fifty thousand dollars."

"It sounds like a fool-proof proposition," Jim said thoughtfully.

RITA stood and walked nervously to the windows. "Jim, I still don't like it. We—we're gambling with the life we have for something we know nothing about. We can get along as we are."

"Don't be so foolish," Jim said shortly. "Fifty thousand dollars will set us up for life. I'm not exactly happy about the prospects of slaving away for the next twenty years to make a niggardly living. You don't have the clothes you should have or the right kind of apartment. And there's the baby that's coming. You want him to have a break, don't you?"

"We can give him a break, Jim. We can give him love and care and tenderness. Those things don't cost a cent. But we don't know what kind of people we will be if we simply fall into a fortune."

"We can find out," Jim said stubbornly. He glanced at Morgan. "It's a deal. Let me see the check, please."

Morgan took a stiff slip of paper from his pocket, handed it to Jim. Jim studied it carefully, turned it over an saw that it was already endorsed.

"All right," he said, quietly. "What do you want me to wish for?"

"For tomorrow's closing figures on the New York stock exchange," Morgan said.

"Please, Jim," Rita said, desperately.

Jim was staring at the check. He saw it in terms of clothes, a car, better food and a new apartment, or perhaps a home. "For Heaven's sake, Rita, will you be quiet?"

He put the check in his pocket and said, "For your sake, Mr. Morgan, I hope you aren't wasting your money." He cleared his throat, while Morgan watched him anxiously.

"I wish," Jim said, slowly, "That I had the closing figures for tomorrow from the New York stock exchange."

He felt somewhat silly as he pronounced the words. Rita was silent, staring at him with an anxious expression. Morgan was holding his breath.

There was complete silence in the room.

Morgan let out his breath slowly.

Rita began to smile slowly. "It didn't work," she said.

"You didn't want it to work," Jim said savagely.

The phone rang suddenly.

Jim looked at Morgan, then hurried to the phone. He picked it up and said, "Yes?"

A quiet, soft voice, said: "I have the information you desired. Would you get a pencil and paper, please?"

"Yes, yes," Jim cried. "Hold on, please."

"I will wait," the soft voice said.

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"We got it," Jim said, tensely. He grabbed pencil and paper from his small desk and with Morgan at his side hurried to the phone. "All right, I'm ready."

THE soft voice began listing names and figures. Jim's pencil flew across the paper, and Morgan's eyes began to gleam with excitement as he studied them.

"Good God!" he said once, incredulously, as Jim listed the closing report on one of the largest firms in the country. "They're through, finished, out of business."

The report took over twenty minutes. Finally the soft voice said, "That is what you wished for. I hope you will be very happy. And I would remind you again of my injunction this morning. Good night."

The phone clicked, went dead in Jim's ear.

Morgan had collected the sheets of paper and was reading through them with a gloating smile. "This will do it," he whispered. "This will make us the biggest men in the county within twenty-four hours." He grabbed Jim's hand and wrung it strongly. "We're in this together, you know. And I needn't remind you to keep this secret. Now, we don't have a minute to lose. Get your hat and coat and come with me."

Jim was caught by the fever of excitement in Morgan's voice. He didn't completely understand what was going to happen, but he knew enough of business and finance to realize roughly what those future closing figures meant.

He got his hat and coat and then went to Rita. "I'm going with Mr. Morgan. You'll be all right here, honey." He had forgotten his momentary annoyance at her. She hadn't wanted him to take this chance, but that was the way with a woman, and he didn't blame her.

"I'll be all right, Jim," she said evenly. "But please—" She turned away from him with a little shrug. "I was going to tell you to be careful, but I think you can take care of yourself."

"Why, sure I can."

"Let's go," Morgan said impatiently.

They spent the night in his office. Morgan was a stock broker with elaborate offices in the Banker's building. There were dozens of desks in an outer office, teletypes and stock tickers by the bunch in each corner of the vast room. Morgan's inner office was carpeted in gray and dominated by an immense semi-circular desk with at least a dozen phones on it.

Morgan threw his coat on a couch and then picked up a phone and ordered coffee and sandwiches sent up from a private catering establishment.

Then he sat down behind the desk and lit another cigar.

"Now, we'll do a little talking," he said. "I've got money, all I need, but money is something one can never stop making. If you decide you have enough you're licked. Someone else comes along with a little more drive and pretty soon you're out. Now tomorrow when the trading starts you and I will work in here alone. You can do as well as one of my vice presidents because I'm going to tell you every step to make. I don't want any one else in on this. It's too big."

After the food and coffee arrived and had been eaten Morgan called his two bankers at their homes.

"I want to be liquid by noon tomorrow," he ordered. "Everything I have goes into cash. That's right, every-

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thing!"

When he hung up he turned to Jim. "Listen carefully now, young man. I'm going to tell you every step of the operation I'm planning." He smiled grimly. "You'll know more about this business than anyone on the street when I'm through. . . ."

AT two thirty he finished. Jim's head was swimming with figures and calculations, but he saw the pattern, saw the complete picture. He made a few comments and asked several questions. Morgan nodded approvingly.

"You've got the mind for it. You've been wasting your time. Now let's go to my club for a few hours sleep."

Jim felt guilty about not returning home, but there was no choice. He decided not to call, since Rita would undoubtedly be asleep anyway.

The next morning they breakfasted early at Morgan's club. It was Jim's first view of the life led by those who are privileged to enjoy it. There were deferential waiters, quick, efficient service, and an entire organization devoted to the luxurious comfort of its members.

Jim liked it. He enjoyed the hovering waiters, the solicitious attention to his needs, the flush feeling of importance when he was helped into his coat and a uniformed attendant sprang into the street to hail them a cab.

They reached Morgan's office by eight thirty and Jim called Rita. She didn't sound angry, and he felt a stab of remorse. He would have felt less guilty had she been sulking.

"I'm awfully sorry about not getting home. But this thing is just too big to leave for a minute."

"I understand, Jim. Will you be home for dinner?"

"Sure thing. And Rita. Call my office and tell Ryan I won't be down."

"You're not quitting?"

"Of course I am. Do that for me. Tell him I'm not interested in working for peanuts anymore. I've got to hang up, baby. Take it easy."

Morgan was waiting with a list of figures they had prepared the night before. "Here's the start. At nine on the head get the Sloan Brokerage outfit on the wire. My account there is solid enough to last us until noon. After that my bankers will have capital enough to see us through the day."

Jim took the figures and sat down before a phone. He watched the clock. At nine he picked up the receiver. . .

The first edition of the city's afternoon paper reached the stands at eleven forty-five. And already there were tremors beginning to shake the financial heart of the country. Grain was off unexpectedly and disastrously. Steel had gone on a rampage, but unaccountably two major stocks of automobile concerns were splitting wide open.

Morgan and Jim didn't need the papers report to tell them what was happening. They could sense it from the buyers they gave their orders to, and feel it in the tension that was beginning to grip the members of Morgan's firm who hurried in and out of the office, looking alternately worried and elated.

Everyone knew a giant push was coming from some direction. A terrible pressure was working against the normal strength of the exchange's financial structure with results that were miraculously efficient. When a company attempted to bolster its stock by buying, such quantities of the stock were dumped on the market that they were swamped. Selling bids were ignored or snapped with such ferocity

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that speculators were baffled.

At twelve o'clock Morgan's real assets were thrown into the fight, converted now into cash. The scope of the operations was trebled within the half hour, and a panic began to grip the financial powers of the exchange.

The small investor saw his holdings fluctuate in a dizzy, patternless manner. Selling was useless; buying was dangerous. The force that was smashing the ordered economy of a nation seemed blind and arbitrary, but experienced observers began to see the development of a design that was staggering in size and ruthlessly destructive in nature.

JIM felt himself caught in the power of what they were doing. He had never known such a sensation in his life. Now he felt the elixir of power and strength coursing through his veins. When he spoke crisp words into a telephone the results would shake vast cartels throughout th world.

He was so engrossed that he hardly understood the secretary who came to tell him his wife was outside.

He stared at her, dazed, as if he'd been brought back to a land he had once known but hadn't seen in years.

Finally his eyes cleared. "Please send her in."

When Rita entered she stared about the huge room with undisguised amazement. Jim took her to a chair, feeling slightly patronizing, although he had been as impressed the first time.

"I've—I've been worried, Jim. Sitting at home listening to the radio frightened me. I don't know what you're doing, but it seems to be upsetting everybody."

"You're damn right it is," Jim said. "Jim, didn't that old man tell you not to use your wish to hurt anyone else?"

"Oh, that nonsense!" He waved a hand irritably. "Someone has to be hurt in this sort of thing." He was learning rapidly.

"Jim, there have been suicides! Companies have failed! Are you and Mr. Morgan responsible for that?"

"No. We can't be held accountable for what some weak minded moron does. Now just don't worry about it. Honey, we'll never have another worry in our life after today."

Morgan called him and he hurried back to the desk. "We've made history today," Morgan said. "But let's keep making it."

They continued their operations, basing their computations on the guaranteed figures they had listed before them; and when the day ended Morgan and Jim Ward knew no way to compute their wealth. They had wrecked many industries, driven small investors into bankruptcy, ruined lives and fortunes, but they had made staggering fortunes for themselves in the process.

When trading stopped, Morgan hung up his phone with a long sigh. He looked at Him and winked. "My boy, we've done it. I intend to call our firm Morgan and Ward from now on, and with this start there's nothing will ever stop us."

Morgan, events proved, was a good prophet.

Within six months the firm of Morgan and Ward was a colossus such as never had been seen or known in the market. Their business expanded, and with their power and wealth came a new way of life for Jim Ward that was as different from his old as life might have been on another planet.

There was a seventeen room duplex apartment in the city, a town hous

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in Bar Harbor and an estate in Florida which he had never seen. Chauffeurs, maids and business managers took the load of detail from his shoulders.

THERE was one flaw in his happiness and that was Rita. She had not come along with him in his existence. She had made no definite break with him, but each month their relationship became more formal, more stiff and unsatisfying.

Jim reasoned that her withdrawal from him had dated from the occasion when she lost her baby. That had been a great blow to her and he believed she hadn't recovered.

She had been alone when it happened and he had been in Bar Harbor. When he returned it was all over and Rita had never been the same again. He was unhappy for a while but there was so much to engross him now that he didn't let it make him gloomy. There was the fascinating work of manipulation and calculation in the market, and that had become a compensation for everything. He had never lost the relish for power. It became his life, his motivation in a very short time.

One night Rita urged him to quit. He stared at her as if she'd gone mad.

"You don't understand what you're saying," he protested.

"I understand you have wrecked the life we once had," she answered.

"That's sheer nonsense. I don't want to hear it mentioned again, do you understand?"

She smiled at that, but there was no humor in her smile. There was nothing but sadness and resignation. "You will not hear it mentioned again Jim," she said quietly.

"Good," he said abruptly.

The next morning he was driven to work at the usual hour. Sitting in the rear of his custom built town car with the morning papers on his knee, an expensive cigar in his hand, he thought about Rita and wondered why she was so unreasonable.

Entering his office at nine he found Morgan there waiting for him. With Morgan was a slim, graying man of perhaps forty, with a lean cautious mouth and eyes that were the color of steel on a frosty morning.

Jim noticed that something was wrong with Morgan. He looked gray, ill.

"Jim, this is Mr. Stevens from the Federal Security Exchange Commission. Mr. Stevens is going to investigate some of our recent activities. Ah . . . a formality eh, Mr. Stevens?"

"I trust so," Mr Stevens said drily. "However, until the investigation is complete I am sealing your books. I will let you know later what our findings are."

He nodded to them and left the office.

"What's up?" Jim demanded angrily. "What did he mean?"

"We—have taken some chances," Morgan said heavily. "The Federal Government doesn't approve of people who take chances."

"You can't be serious!"

"Sit down, Jim," Morgan said. He rubbed a hand wearily over his forehead. "I must have been mad," he said in a whisper. "Something seems to have taken hold of me since I met you. I—I've done crazy things."

"Tell me everything," Jim said harshly. "How deeply are we in?"

"All the way."

Morgan talked for ten minutes and the picture he painted shocked Jim. He had known what they were doing was ruthless, but he hadn't realized

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that it was also illegal.

When Morgan finished he walked to the door. "I am going to my office, Jim. I don't wish to be disturbed."

Jim watched him leave and he suddenly felt himself shaking. He sat down and tried to remain calm. . . .

When the office manager came hurrying in an hour later Jim knew from the expression on his face that something had happened.

"What is it?" he said, forcing his voice to remain normal.

"It's Mr. Morgan, sir. He— fell from his window. He must have been looking out and lost his balance."

Jim felt a great cold fist closing over his stomach. "Very well," he said.

The office manager was staring at him bewilderedly, completely baffled by his lack of reaction.

"I'll take care of everything," he said, finally.

"Very well," Jim said.

When the man left his control broke. He jumped to his feet and began pacing the great office. He felt trapped by its size and luxury.

What was he doing here? Why was he in this office that bought and sold pieces of paper and people's lives and fortunes? This wasn't a place for Jim Ward.

He glared about frantically. There was Mr. Stevens! There was the investigation.

He beat his fist against his forehead.

"WHAT did that mean to him?" This wasn't his life; this was a dream he had dreamt. His life was with Rita. It was simple life, with simple pleasures and simple worries. Where had he lost that life?

"It's not too late!" he muttered. "It can't be."

He sprang to the phone, dialed his apartment. When the butler answered he snapped: "Get Mrs. Ward immediately."

"I'm afraid that's impossible, sir. Mrs. Ward has left." The butler's voice was dry, impersonal. "She told me to tell you, sir, that she has arranged everything with her lawyer. She caught the nine thirty plane for Reno, sir."

Jim put the phone down slowly. For moments he sat on the corner of his desk, staring sightlessly at the great framed charts on the wall.

Finally he put on his coat and left the office. He had no idea of where he was going but must get away from this place. Down on the street he walked aimlessly, dazedly until he reached the intersection of Adams street.

He stopped at the curb, although the light was green. Memories came to him of another morning he had stood at this intersection. He had saved a white-bearded old man that morning.

". . . as long as it harms no one else."

He thought for a moment he had spoken the words aloud. But they were merely burning his mind. Those were the words of the old man.

The light changed to red!

Jim Ward stepped forward.

A hand reached for his elbow, but fell away, slowly, regretfully.

Brakes shrieked protestingly; and then a woman screamed. Traffic stopped and a policeman ran toward the scene shouting orders.

The man who had reached for Jim Ward's elbow sighed softly, sadly. Turning he shuffled away and the cold, lonely wind blew in from the sea, whispering in his white beard, misting his dark glasses.

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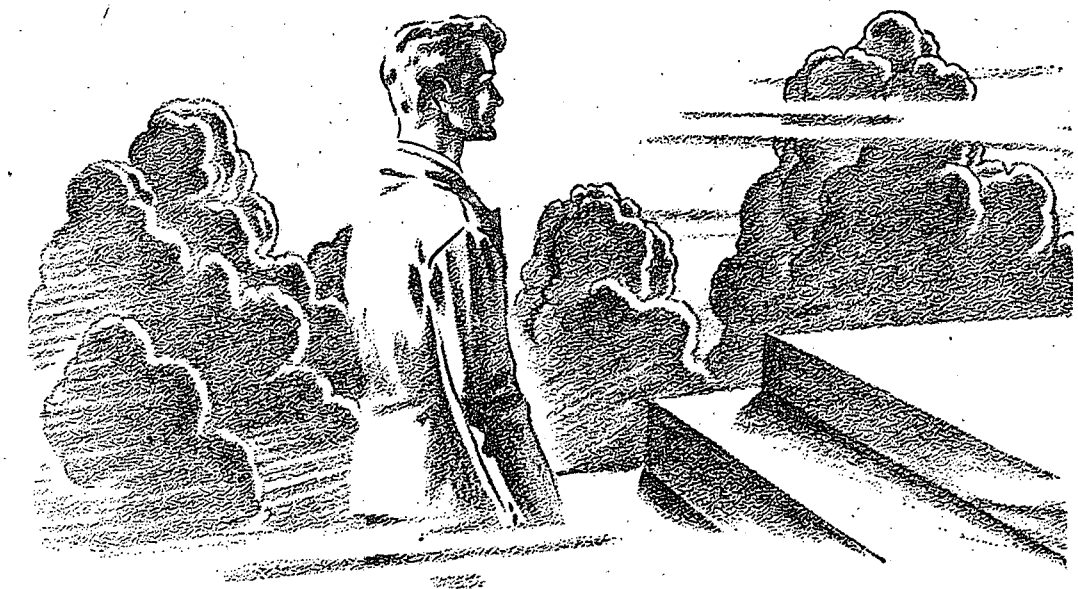
Hildy Finds His Wings

by H. B. HICKEY

THERE seemed to be no doubt of it. Spring had arrived, a bit late perhaps, but still definitely arrived. Hildy Wilcox could see it on all sides. The grass on the lawn had that odd warm green cast to it already; the first buds were on the cottonwoods bordering the square; the first lovers were strolling . . . They were coming toward him, hand in hand, and as they came abreast his lips opened. But as he looked into the girl's eyes, his mouth closed on the unspoken words and a shy grin twisted his lips. Then they were behind Hildy, and the bitterness returned.

He stretched his long lean legs straight ahead of him and relaxed against the slats of the bench. Hildy Wilcox was neither a Hildy or a Wilcox. **He was an angel.** One of those things sometimes called a heavenly body. But since he had come among mortals he had found it expedient to

Hildy was a good Angel, and he wanted to remain one—but then he let a human emotion sway him . . .



The Recorder stood facing him and said, "Hildy, do you realize what you have done on Earth?"

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assume a mortal name. Hildy Wilcox was as good as any.

Hildy sighed and thought of that long-gone day when he had received the call to come to the Recorder's Office. He knew what the summons signified, a call to aid some distressed mortal who some day would be an immortal. All had gone well until that perfectly luscious young blond walked in. Then the orderly became the disorderly and whatever the Recorder was talking about fled Hildy's mind. The most important thing of all, the number, the identifying mark, was lost to Hildy's memory. He had thought only of the blond. And of course he could not ask again for it; there are some things not permitted in Heaven, one of which is the forgetting of an order from one of the Higher-Ups . . . .

Hildy sighed deeply again. There had been snow on the ground when he arrived on Earth. There had been the sound of bells, Christmas bells, and people had the looks of spiritual content on their faces. But winter had taken its toll. Of course Hildy felt neither heat nor cold, hunger nor fulfillment, but he had to wear a coat in winter, and whether food had a taste or not he had to partake of it. Now it was spring.

Yes, now it was spring. And Hildy was as far from the completion of his task as the day he had arrived. Worse, the sands of time were running out on him. After all, he hadn't eternity in which to do his work. The messengers of Heaven are busy folk. There are more who get there than most people assume. And Hildy was already thinking that the time would soon come when the bells would start ringing in his ears, the sound of Heavenly voices their chant, and his stay would come to an inglorious end. The thought of his punishment sent a sudden chill through Hildy's body.

For the thousandth time Hildy tried to think of even a clue to the identity of the person. But alas, nothing, not even the small consolation of sex. There was one thing Hildy knew, however, and that was should he by some vague chance find the person, there would be the familiar chorus and bells' sounds. Of course they could also mean he was only being summoned back for a reprimand and punishment . . . .

SUDDENLY Hildy felt a stirring of hunger. He sat erect with an abruptness which startled some pigeons feeding nearby and made them lift their wings in flight. Hunger! Hildy groaned aloud. It was the first sign of his Superior's knowledge of Hildy's misdemeanor. There would be other manifestations soon . . .

Hildy clasped his aching temples in delicate fingers. He had to think it out. He knew the person was somewhere in the vicinity of this sunlit square. He had been set down here after his long journey. But there must be five thousand people living within the four-block rectangle.

Hildy rose and walked slowly toward the near exit of the park. There was a restaurant close by which he patronized because he thought that surely of all places it might be the one where his quarry might be found. It was a small place of a few tables and booths which were placed along one wall. There was a long counter divided by an aisle down which the two waitresses the place boasted could bring their trays of food to those in the booths and at the tables.

The restaurant was in that slack period between lunch and dinner. One of the waitresses was at the far end,

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sitting on a stool and engrossed in a cross-word puzzle. The other girl was on duty for the few customers which might want service. Hildy proved to be the second customer, the other, a blond man in his early thirties, busy at a bowl of chile mac.

The waitress, a pretty thing in an apron of powder blue, trimmed at the waist and throat with a scarlet binding, came smiling toward him. He had become a familiar sight to the two girls, and since he never gave trouble but always ate in silence and minded his own affairs, was popular with them. The fact that he left a good tip was a factor also.

"Hi, Hildy," the girl said as she placed the water and set-up before him. "Kind of early, aren't you?"

"I guess so," Hildy said. "Felt hungry . . ."

Her eyes widened. "You! Got hungry? F'r Heaven's sake! Well, friend, you've come to the right place and at the right time. Nick just got some nice tenderloins in. So you just sit tight and we'll be back in a short time . . ."

He smiled to himself as the girl trotted off toward the rear. He noticed that she whispered something to the girl doing the cross-word puzzle, in passing and saw the other give him a quick, smiling glance of recognition. Tess must have mentioned his hunger. He shook his head in wonder. Somehow, though he had been among these humans many times before, he never seemed to get accustomed to their quirks.

A previous diner had left a paper and Hildy reached over and slid it in front of him. He glanced at the headlines; murder, arson, tragedy, and despair filled its pages. He flipped the pages quickly. He sighed in satisfaction as he came to the editorial page. There it was, The Wandering Road, the column by Jason Gordon.

Hildy had come across the column one afternoon while having lunch, became engrossed by the style, wit and human nature of the articles and ever since then, always read Gordon. Today's column was on something called the Jackpot. It seemed, according to Gordon, that the real jackpots of life paid off in small figures. Hildy's face bore a pleased expression as he read on.

". . . Hildy! Hildy . . . !"

He looked up, blank-eyed. Tess was looking down at him, a bright grin showing her perfect teeth.

"Come on, hungry man! That steak'll get cold," she said.

IT was good, Hildy decided. And at the same time felt dismay. Now food was beginning to have a taste. Oh dear! But no use crossing that bridge until he came to it. He finished it to the last nibble and all the rest of the meal also, plus a double portion of apple pie. And all the while Tess watched him in delight.

"Man oh man!" she exclaimed. "You sure can put it away when you do get hungry. Now that's your trouble, I think. You eat too often. Don't give yourself a chance to get hungry. Three meals a day. That ought to be your limit."

Oddly enough, Hildy felt better. He looked over to the counter mate he had acquired while he had been eating and thought, now there's a man who could use some of Tess's advice. Not that he was thin or looked like he could use food. But he had ordered something and was just picking at it as though the food was going to bite him back. Hildy reached into his trouser pocket while he was studying the other.

A startled look came to life in his

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eyes. For the first time in his stay on Earth he found no money in his pocket. This had never happened to him before. It had all been so simple before. All he had to do was reach down and there were bills for the plucking. Now nothing but the canvas could be felt. He reached with furious haste into the other pocket. Nothing!

Tess guessed instantly what had happened. And a look of sorrow showed in her eyes. Not Hildy, she thought. He was such a nice guy. Not like the others. They were riff-raff, bums, guys who wouldn't work unless someone stuck a gun in their ribs. She knew what was going to happen. Nick was a tough guy when it came to something like this . . .

"Any-anything wrong, Hildy?" she asked hesitantly.

"Why, uh, I guess I didn't bring any money with me," he said.

Usually Tess had some money with her. But this was the day before payday, and the day before she had wired some money to her mother, and to top it off the lunch had not been good, only sixty cents in tips, all of which had gone on her uniforms. Tess knew the other girl was in even worse shape. There was but a single hope. Nick. He was in the kitchen. She gave a quick glance toward the swinging doors, saw their blank faces and turned quickly back to Hildy.

"Scram! Don't wait. I'll square it with Nick. And when you get it, why come in and . . ."

But her advice came an instant too late. The short, bulky figure of the proprietor swung through the kitchen doors at that instant. Hildy was caught in the wed. Nick Ginopoulis had a bad habit. He believed no one. The years he had spent in this neighborhood had taught him something. The honest ones were scarcer than hundred-dollar tips. So it was that he liked to rough up any dead-beat who tried to get away without paying. And although Nick liked Hildy, he would treat him as he did anyone else in the same case.

Unaware of her action, Tess had brought her hand to her mouth in a gesture of dismay.

"Ooh! Ooh, dear!" she exclaimed softly.

The softly spoken words and the quick movement she made caught the attention of the man sitting beside Hildy. He brought his eyes up to hers in a sharp look of scrutiny.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

TESS was a pretty girl. She had hair the color of honey, and disposition to match. Her face was regular and without any particular distinction, but she had deep brown eyes which were at variance with her soft, rose-colored complexion and her blond hair. And behind the facade of prettiness was a very shrewd mind. This man sitting beside Hildy was not a stranger to her. She did not know what he did for a living but she had an idea it was something to do with the arts, not at all unusual in this neighborhood where one couldn't toss a coin and not hit an embryo Picasso, or Hemingway, or Frost. She had noticed that he carried a notebook and was in the habit of jotting notes as he ate. Further, since he did not carry a **Racing Form** or handicap sheet he was not playing horses, so she reasoned he was a writer of sorts.

She made up her mind on the instant.

"Yes! This man is a friend of mine. A regular guy. But it seems he didn't bring any money with him. And he's eaten a two-dollar meal. If I had

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the money he could have it but I'm on the short side myself . . ."

"It's a good buck," the man said, "but you'll have to pass it to someone else."

Her eyes flashed scorn. The nerve of this character! Forgotten was Hildy's predicament.

"Why you jerk!" she spat at him. "I'm not begging it for me! I wouldn't touch your money with a ten-foot pole. I shoulda known better. I picked you for a cheapskate . . ."

The stranger suddenly smiled though obviously there was no reason for it. He turned his glance away from the girl opposite and looked once more at Hildy, whose face was greenly-pale. Hildy's hands were trembling and his mouth was working. He hadn't thought that his not having any money would lead to this verbal battle.

" . . . Believe me, if it were anyone but Hildy here, I'd have crawled before . . ."

"Wassa wrong?" a bull-voice asked.

Neither of the three had noticed Nick's approach. He had heard Tess' voice raised in anger, had turned and seen the look of fury on her face and had moved from his position behind the cash register. Now he stood at Tess' side, his wide, swarthy face oddly child-like in curiosity.

"What's wrong, he asks," the stranger said sharply. "Are you blind? Quick, man! Is there a doctor close by?"

"Wassa matta?" Nick asked in alarm.

"That stuff you serve! He's poisoned! Take a look at the poor guy!"

Instantly suspicion clouded the bloodshot eyes of the restaurant owner. He looked down at the plate which was clean of food. He saw the side dishes which told him Hildy had eaten a meal for at least a dollar ninety. Aha! A chiseler, he thought. Well! He'd take care of this.

"He's eata the food, no? How come he getta seeck?" Nick asked, smiling at his own cleverness.

"Why? Do you have signs on the plates, one saying this food is poisoned and this not? Are you blind? By God! I'll see to it this man gets a lawyer and sues you for the last dime you got. . .!"

"Hole on, mister," Nick was no longer smiling. Lawyers! Oh, no. Doctors were cheaper.

But the stranger had already left his stool and stepped to Hildy's side and had placed his arms under Hildy's armpits, preparatory to lifting him. He looked past his shoulder at Nick.

"Go ahead! Take heem to the doc. An' tell the doc to sand the beel to me," Nick said unctuously.

"Darn tootin' I will," the stranger said as he assisted Hildy from the stool.

For the barest instant Hildy moved in protest. But as the other's arms tightened around his chest, Hildy relaxed and decided to let things ride. He was curious as to the other's reasons for this buffoonery. As for Tess, she could only stand open-mouthed in surprise at the turn of events. Then Nick turned on her and shouted:

"By golly! I gonna fire that dem chef. I tole heem a t'ousan' times, be sure the meat's in good shape . . ."

The faintest twinkle of amusement showed in Tess' eyes as the two men reached the door. For the stranger had turned as they passed the cash register and had bestowed a broad wink in her direction. She knew then that the whole thing had been faked

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by the nimble-witted man.

"WELL, really," Hildy said as they seated themselves on one of the benches in the square to which they'd gone on their departure from the restaurant. "I don't know what to say except it was uh, I was going to say decent. But after all I wasn't ill. It was just that . . ."

The stranger smiled at his companion and placed a hand on Hildy's knee.

"Skip it, fella," he said. "Any time Jason Gordon . . ."

"Jason Gordon?" Hildy asked in delight. "The newspaper columnist?"

"Ex," Gordon broke in. And though the smile persisted, it was a little forced now.

Hildy made clucking sounds of sympathy.

"Yep," Gordon went on. "They done took my job right from under me. Seems as though consolidation was not only in the air but also in effect. They said I was good but that newspapers live on circulation and I just wasn't in the class of the comic pages."

"But I liked your column," Hildy said.

"Well, bless you for saying that. I'm afraid my late editor liked it too. But the front office decided they could do without it."

"And now what are you going to do?" Hildy asked.

Gordon shrugged his shoulders. He didn't know why he was telling this broken-down character his troubles. It was only too obvious that this Joe had enough of his own (the incident of the unpaid check was still in Gordon's mind) yet Gordon found himself telling all.

"Let's talk about you," Gordon said, switching the subject. "Any guy lucky enough to have Tess for a girl friend . . ."

"Girl friend?" Hildy's voice rose in astonishment. "I think you're under a misapprehension. I know the young lady simply as someone of my acquaintance from eating there. She's a very charming, good-hearted child, but really . . ."

"Okay! Okay," Gordon threw both hands outward in a gesture of resignation. "You don't have to tell me. I come in there only because, now why am I telling you this? It's none of your business."

"Nor was I yours," Hildy said in gentle reminder.

"Oh, that! I know Nick too. He likes to put the slug on people who don't pay their bills. Besides . . ."

"Tess made you angry," Hildy filled in the unspoken gap.

Gordon grinned slyly. This Hildy man was all right.

"You had no money either, did you?" Hildy asked.

The unexpected question threw Gordon for a loss. He could only gape at his seat partner.

"How the hell did you know that?" he asked after a few seconds.

Perhaps, Hildy thought, some of my angelic powers have slipped? But not all of them. He realized there were some Heavenly divinations still within his reach. Hildy went on:

"But I must say I have no doubts that was not the big factor in your gesture. However, let's forget about that. I am curious about your future. Tell me of your plans."

Gordon rubbed a fist into a palm with a loving gesture. Tell me your plans, the Joe said. What plans? What plans can a guy have who lived away the salary he was paid, who lived, as it were from moment to moment without thought of the

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future? Not quite, Gordon thought ruefully. Since the first moment he had seen Tess, she had entered into every one of his plans. But now. . . . He sighed aloud.

"I see," Hildy said.

"You do? So tell me, what do you see?" Gordon asked in sarcasm.

"I see many things. The pigeons, for example. They are simple, elemental beings. They concern themselves with so little. Now let's take that setter there," Hildy pointed with his head toward a setter frolicking near a woman. "See how it adapts itself to conditions. His mistress is not interested in him. So he looks for someone else with whom to play. Yet because he might be chastised for it he looks with one wary eye toward her while he cajoles each passerby. So we go another step up the scale. That down-and-outer on the bench over there. He seems asleep. Now watch. Here comes a man and a woman walking toward him.

"He is no longer asleep. Yet how did he know they were coming? A sense he has developed, perhaps? Now he rises and walks toward them. See. His shoulders slump, his eyes water, his voice whines. But only to the woman, not the man. He pays no attention to the man. Aah! But the man sees and hears him, and with a gesture of disgust reaches into his pocket and tosses a coin to the mendicant. Why? Because he does not want him to bother the woman. See how well the bum has developed his timing. The money was given him just as the three of them reached the bench he had been sitting on. The man and woman continue and the other one slides into his seat again, his arms pillowing his head.

"Watch, Jason Gordon! There are things to be learned. See. One, two, three, four men have passed him by. He continues to sit. Now a fifth comes along. And we see the drama repeated. Another coin in his greasy palm. How did he know that particular man would give alms?"

JASON Gordon had to admit to bewilderment. He couldn't figure it out. Why the fifth man and not the others? The man and woman business wasn't hard. But this . . .

"It's quite simple. Our ragged friend never looks at a face. He says faces are like masks. One can't trust what one sees. But shoes, they are the sign of a man. Never bum from a man who hasn't his shoes shined. He isn't fussy. A man who has his shoes shined is invariably a neat person who dislikes dirt in any form and the proximity of a ragged, ill-smelling person is repugnant to his senses. Therefore, to get rid of odor and sight he will give a coin."

Gordon knitted his brow in admiration of the other's reasoning. He looked Hildy up and down and saw . . . He didn't quite know what he saw. A man, yes. Tall as the average, with a face from which any distinguishing or differentiating marks had been wiped clean . . . Hildy was without doubt the most ordinary-looking man Gordon had ever seen.

If Hildy was conscious of the other's scrutiny he gave no sign of it. He was still regarding the bum who had gone back to his roost.

"Now watch this!" Hildy suddenly exclaimed. "See that man coming along?"

Gordon looked up and saw a tall man, stooped, who strode with a loose shambling gait, a man who was dressed in a plain blue suit, somewhat the worse for wear, a man who was hatless and whose hair needed

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cutting badly.

"He is going to pass our friend on the bench and suddenly turn and take a ten-dollar bill from his pocket and drop it in the bum's lap," Hildy went on.

Just as Hildy had said, so it happened. But they couldn't see the denomination of the bill. Before the hatless man had passed from sight Gordon was moving at a run for the bum. He reached him just as the bum, who had looked at the money in amazement, was stuffing it in his pocket. Hildy followed at a more leisurely pace.

". . . How much was that bill?" Gordon asked, as he leaned over the down-and-outer in a pose that was deliberately menacing.

The man looked up with frightened, wavering eyes at Gordon. Then seeing Hildy, and recognizing him as someone familiar to his surroundings, he begged with his eyes for succor. Hildy smiled gently and said:

"Don't be frightened. The money is yours to keep. This man only wants to know how much it was."

"JUST tell me one thing," Gordon demanded. "How did you know the old guy was going to give the bum a ten-dollar bill?"

Hildy shifted his lean length to a more comfortable position on the bench to which they'd returned and said:

"Let us say I'm clairvoyant."

"Okay. So it's said. But how did you know the bum was going to get a sawbuck?"

"Then, let's say I am endowed with supernatural powers. I have an other-world perception," Hildy replied.

"Nuts! I don't believe that."

"And what do you believe?" Hildy asked abruptly.

For a long startled instant Gordon was silent. He was silent because he had no answer to the question. And suddenly Gordon knew why he had lived as he did. It was really quite simple. Gordon believed in nothing. There was nothing of valid form in either the spiritual or material insofar as he was concerned. He looked far back in his mind, trying to search out even the smallest of things in which he believed, and found to his sudden terror that there was nothing. Then, like a flash, there came a picture before him. It was a face, a face that was as lonely as a mountain dawn. Hair the color of honey fell in gentle waves to a throat that was like a column of wondrous Carrarra marble. Tess . . . Gordon groaned aloud.

He had told this strange man seated beside him that he loved Tess. How could he have said it? What had he to offer her? He had nothing not even the satisfaction of having done his work well. He became aware of Hildy's fingers on his thigh. He looked up at the oddly-gentle eyes of the other with a begging question in his own.

"The world, my friend," Hildy said, "Is so full of good things. If only people knew, if only there was a way of telling them. Surely you who are a writer have the means . . ."

The idea came to Gordon at that very instant. What made him think of it he didn't know. But of a sudden it came to him with the startling swiftness of a clap of thunder.

"Of course I have!" Gordon yelled aloud. "And what an idea I just got . . ." He didn't see the grin Hildy hid in a palm. ". . . A letter to the editor, done as a column. Wow! Hildy, you're a, a Lord! I don't know what

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to say. If I had the money I'd buy you a drink. Or even a cup of coffee . . ." He snapped his finger suddenly. "Y'know," he went on,, "we pulled a rather shabby trick on Nick. Let's go back and square it."

Tess was the first to see them. For a second fright showed in her eyes. Then, when she saw Gordon step directly to Nick at the cash register, pride took its place. For she heard Gordon say:

"Nick! I got something to tell you. Neither of us had any money a while ago. That's why I pulled a fast one on you . . ."

The sullen eyes of the restaurant owner narrowed in quick anger. He had been thinking it over after the departure of the two and had come to the conclusion he had been bilked. Now this louse had come back to gloat. He balled up a pair of fists the size of small hams and started for the two. Neither moved. Or raised their arms in defense.

"So mebbe you gotta the money now?" Nick said in repressed rage as he reached them.

"No! But we will have in a day or two," Gordon answered. "You can take my word on that."

"Aha! So now you make fon. Hokay wisea guys . . ." Nick said no more but struck swiftly.

AN EXPRESSION of intense pain clouded the sullen eyes and Nick bellowed suddenly and dropped his hand. To Gordon it was as if a miracle had taken place. For Nick had swung. Only the blow hadn't landed. A bare inch from Gordon's jaw; and Nick's fist had stopped as though it had contacted a brick wall.

In the meantime Nick was trying to shake the pain from his fingers. He didn't know what happened or how, only that his fist hadn't quite connected.

"Nick . . ." Hildy's voice was like a soothing unguent.

The hurt went away from the hand at the word. Nick looked up at Hildy, his face even more stupid than was its wont.

". . .You didn't want to hit Mr. Gordon, did you?"

Nick scratched his head, looked to Tess, then shifted his glance back to Hildy.

"No-o. Mebbe I too used to smackin' don thesea boms. H'm. Mebbe I wrong. You theenks so, meester?"

"Yes. Hitting someone never settles anything."

"No-o. I guessa not. Bot that's how I raised. Fight, fight, alla time. Why? I like meester Gordon. I like you. So why I wanna heet you? So what eef you owe me a cople bocks? Or he owe me a cople bocks? I don't go broke. . ."

Tess gave a sharp yelp of delight, threw her arms around the astonished and flustered Nick and planted a quick kiss on the swarthy cheek. Nick retreated, his arms paddling in helpless and foolish flops, trying to ward off another such attack from the girl.

"Is on the hos!" he said thickly as he rushed back to his lares and penates, the cash register. His face was brick-red, yet delight was all-too apparent in his eyes. Nick had found fellowship.

"Well what do you know about Nick?" Gordon was dazed by the turn of events.

Tess turned slowly about until she was facing the two men again. Her eyes went suddenly wintry. The remembrance of Gordon's words and manner returned. Her words had a vitriolic edge:

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"So you came back, eh? What was the matter, afraid Nick'd sue you?"

As she spoke she stepped forward and leaned her weight on the edge of the counter until she was separated from Gordon by only its width. And Gordon also leaned forward. But his action was not for conversation's sake. He continued leaning forward until his lips met hers. Her right hand came up, swift as a boxer's. And though he ducked instinctively, her finger tips struck against his nose, drawing a thin line of claret from one nostril.

"Oh! Oh, you dope!" she bleated in simulated anger. "Here! Sit down and let me fix that leak . . ."

Hildy stood quietly to one side and looked from one to another of the three. Nick was busy with his account book at the cash register, Gordon and Tess had completely forgotten his existence . . . He smiled to himself. The summons came at the very instant. It was unmistakable. First the sound of tiny bells, then the swelling chorus of voices and last the sonorous command to return . . .

HILDY Wilcox, late of Earth, lever of Heaven, and now in Purgatory, a self-made one, stood, ill at ease before the Superior Being, the Recorder. Hildy had come immediately. The vast Hall of Records was bathed in a Heavenly glow. The shiny desks, with their attendants all busy filing, adjusting, computing, measuring and analyzing, stood in numberless procession for as far as the eye could see. The Recorder stood before his desk-stand, tall, austere, with a noble face framed in a veritable mane of a beard. Two messengers stood, one to either side of him. Hildy, uncomfortable and forlorn, waited his turn.

". . . You will go to a city called Los Angeles," the Recorder was saying, "where you will find a man whose occupation is the selling of automobiles. I have given you his identification and number. He has spent many years in connivance and chicanery. But because when once, as a young man he gave of his very life's blood for a stranger, at the risk of his own life, he deserves a chance at Heaven's Gates. Go and bring him forth for the Final Judgment . . ."

The messenger on his right hand departed. The Recorder then turned to the one on his left and said:

"On the planet Earth, in the country called United States, in the city called New York, search out the man whose identification and number I have given you. He has lived a life of goodness and nobility. The charities to which he has given are numberless. He has made humble obeisance before God. He has done everything in his power to make of his Earthly life a Paradise for his fellow men. Seek this man out and bring him hither. He will be found in rags, begging for a crust of bread. You will know him by this sign; whatever bread he is given is shared among his fellows until to him goes the last, a crumb . . ."

At last Hildy and the Recorder were face to face.

The Recorder's eyebrows lifted in speculation, then suddenly went higher in recognition.

"Aah! Yes . . . The messenger from the fourth phalanx of the sixth court. Number . . . ?"

Hildy gave his number. It was a well-known fact, one which gave the Heavenly Hosts many a private laugh, that the Recorder had a very bad memory.

"Yes, yes. Of course," there was

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satisfaction in the Recorder's voice. The giving of instructions was a form with which he was as familiar as the curl of his beard. But names, numbers, positions, dates bothered him. Now it was clear. He knew who this one was. "Do you know what you've done?"

Hildy had an idea. But he couldn't say. He could only shake his head numbly.

"You do?" there was complete surprise in the Recorder's voice.

"Of course," Hildy found his voice at last. He wondered at the surprise in the Superior Being's voice. Hildy went on, "I forgot the number and identification of the Earthly being . . ."

"You never received identification or number," the Recorder said flatly.

"But-but-but," Hildy stuttered in complete confusion.

"Temptation was thrown in your path," the other went on. "Being a messenger of the fourth phalanx of the sixth court you had never seen a member of the Heavenly Chorus before. Her beauty and charm made you forget where you were for the moment. And in that moment the test was given you."

"Test?" Hildy asked blankly. It was the first he'd ever heard of a test.

"Yes, a test. We give them once in a while. We give them because once in a while we find being an angel makes us smug, vain, arrogant, and sometimes a little self-important. Therefore the test. Understand?"

HILDY didn't but he shook his head as though what the other said made very good sense to him. The Recorder went on:

"So you were sent to Earth, and, as it were, put on your own."

Now it made sense for Hildy. It also made him curious. Since he had been given a test he had either passed or not. There were merits or punishments in that case. Hildy knew he had failed. He was only wondering what the punishment would be.

The Recorder put an elbow on the desk popped his chin in a palm and gazed reflectively down at Hildy. Certainly there were all sorts of people in Heaven. But, thought the Recorder, very few as ordinary in appearance as this one. Probably why he was made a messenger. Oh, well, better tell the poor dev— the Recorder silently pled for forgiveness, and finished his thought—angel what the Heavenly decision was.

". . .You were not allowed any aid from the Heavenly Hosts," the Recorder went on. "Of course no harm could come to you in any form. But other than that, the way was not paved for your deeds. And what did you do . . .?"

The last was said as if it were the question to an indictment. Hildy felt a justifiable anger.

"I did what I thought was right!" Hildy said humbly. He looked the Superior Being full in the eyes. "A man whose heart was good had been led astray; I set his feet in the right path. And because of what I did for him, a girl found happiness and contentment and love. A man whose heart had become bitter found the apple had more than a worm; it held sweetness and satisfaction, and became a better man. Perhaps not one of these will reach Heaven. I am not the Supreme Judge . . . But surely there is as much of Heaven on Earth if one but chooses it. I tried to help those few find it. That was all . . ."

(CONCLUDED ON PAGE 129)

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THE KEY

by Berkeley Livingston

Seven rooms of the house were open, but the eighth was locked—for a good reason—to keep the evil inside . . .

THE man's right leg jack-knifed and if he hadn't clutched the door jamb he would have fallen. A wry grin parted the thin lips in a crooked crease. He sighed, then carefully placing one leg after the other, made off toward the bus stop a full two blocks away. . . .

New-fallen snow gave the street an oddly virginal look, as though the mantle it had been given was one of purity. Even the ramshackle buildings, most of them in a state of disrepute, had an air of cleanliness which oddly enough, did not seem foreign. And into the peace of the street a car slid to a stop on softly hissing tires before the tavern from which the man had stepped only a few seconds ago.

A bulky-looking man stepped grunting from out of the rear door and immediately after another followed, grunting softly as the first did because of the heavy coat he wore and also because of the small effort it took to get out of the rather narrow confines of the back of the car. The second joined the first who had leaned his head through the opened window of the driver's cab. The second stood beside the first and waited until he had instructed the driver. Then, when his superior had done with talk, followed him into the tavern.

There was nothing about either physically to proclaim, the policeman, for surely there were those within the tavern who were as large, as void of expression, as thick of shoulder, as heavy of foot and phlegmatic of voice, yet on the instant of their arrival, as if they had brought signs with them, every man in the tavern knew they were police.

The first one gave but a cursory glance to the body on the floor at the rear of the place. His pale eyes, the color of washed-out blue cotton, traveled slowly from face to face not missing a single one. Then his head shook in a barely discernible signal for his partner and the other moved ponderously forward until he reached the lifeless figure about which there had been a cluster of men as they entered the door. The men melted away from the dead one at the detective's approach until when he reached it he was quite alone. . . .

The bus came to a sliding halt at the stop at the corner. The driver, watching the signal light on the right hand corner didn't see the man waiting for the door to open. The man knocked with impatience and after a few seconds pushed at the door. It

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An evil mist seeped out of the box, and a contorted face—his own—stared up at him . . .

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swung inward and he stepped in, rubbing his hands briskly to restore circulation. The driver, intent on the traffic signal, didn't turn his head, and the passenger reached into first one pocket, then another, for the coin he needed. A half-hearted grin appeared on his lips as he came to the realization that he had no money. Then slyly, stealthily, he put his hand over the box, as though depositing a coin. And after a second, when the driver didn't turn his head, the man simply strolled forward and found an empty seat at the rear of the coach.

The lights changed and the driver put the bus into gear with a loud grinding sound. The man at the rear sat looking out into the cold night, and stared emptily at the snow-flecked streets. After a bit the complexion of the streets changed. He had boarded the bus in the heart of a business district. Now they had moved into a residential neighborhood. And after a while they entered a district where the homes were no longer cheek by jowl, but were scattered sparsely and without regard for proper alignment, as though the owners did not want the same label on the clothes of their living.

ONCE more they came to a stop light. It was the signal for a number of the passengers to alight, this being the last intersection where a crosstown bus could be got. The tall, slender man with the hard-bitten face pulled the collar of his coat up around his chin and alighted with the rest. But unlike the others he continued past the corner where they waited for the other bus.

His was the last house on the street. As he walked toward it he noticed that the snow lay heavier here than it had downtown, and that the wind had drifted it up against doors and trees in hillocks of unblemished whiteness. He moved slowly up the four steps to the front door, fumbling in a pocket for the key; he had seen the abscence of lights and knew there was no one home. The lock clicked open and he shoved the door inward, making sure his shoes were wiped free of snow. His hand moved toward the light switch but as it touched, moved away and fell to his side.

He mumbled:

"Just as well it's dark. Don't want Jane to see me anyway. Not like this . . . . Aah!" he sighed, "No. Not like this . . . again. . . ."

He walked straight for the rear of the house, down the long length of carpeted hall until he reached the door which led to the kitchen. And again there was an instant of indecision. He felt hunger but going into the kitchen meant turning on a light. Somehow, he wanted the dark, the warm comforting dark tonight. The stairs leading to the three bedrooms upstairs were at his right hand and he mounted them. His steps were muffled, soundless as he walked the length of hall, past the three rooms and into his den.

The leather of his easy chair held an odd pleasure for him. He sat there, his coat still up close to his chin, and leaned his head back against the chill leather. And as he sat his eyes closed, though not in sleep, and a strange thing happened. . .

"JANE," Rodney Blake said, after a last gulp of the coffee and while he was one his way to the hall closet for his jacket, "I'm going to . . ." the last faded off into indistinguishability.

Jane Blake smiled as she set about

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clearing off the breakfast dishes. He would be back, she knew, and resume at the point where he left off. Rod could be such a kid, she thought. Stacking the cups and saucers neatly in the sink, she turned and went back to the table for the sugar and creamer. Rodney returned just as she put the creamer in the refrigerator. He was tying the knot in his tie.

". . . So the boss said. . . ." he said, and stopped at her smile.

"Slow down, honey," she said. "I didn't get what went on between, I'm going to, and the boss said."

"Oh," he was apologetic. "Sorry, hon." He grinned widely at her and his eyes crinkled in pleasant folds. Then, "Seems the boss is gettin' smart to what a crackerjack salesman I am and he told me last night that another couple of good sales like I had early this week and there'd be a healthy raise for me. Get that, honey? A real piece of money. Maybe enough to get that car for me and that fur coat for you. Boy. . . .!" his voice trailed off in delightful speculation.

She stepped up to him and implanted a warm kiss on his mouth. Her cheeks flushed as she straightened the knot in his tie. Giving it a last pat with one hand, she shoved him toward the kitchen door with the other.

"Just you do your job, Rod," she said. "The good things'll come then . . . ."

He winked broadly at her as he turned and scurried down the stairs. He had two blocks to go to the bus stop and the eight-fifteen was only a minute or so away.

Gerard and company had the entire eleventh floor of the Merchant's Exchange Building. They were probably the largest real-estate dealers in the whole city. Rodney Blake stilled his whistle as he hit the door. Old Penroy, the office manager, was an old-maidish sort of guy. Whistling men and gum-chewing girls were an abomination as far as he was concerned.

Rodney occupied one of the cubicles given to some of the salesmen. The door had his name in italics. He pushed it open, hung his jacket up neatly in the small wardrobe closet. Then he shoved out the swivel chair behind the desk and sat down. The mail was already on his desk and for the next ten minutes he went through it. There was nothing there which demanded an immediate reply so he didn't summon the common stenographer several of the salesmen used.

Throwing the last circular, an ad on a foreclosure, into the waste basket, Rodney reached for his private memo pad and found the names of two prospective clients he wanted to keep in touch with. Calling them, he found one had changed his mind and the other was not in his office as yet. Which left Rodney with not too much to do. The telephone men hadn't got down to any real calls as yet (if they had he would have had pink slips on his desk), so he knew for the next ten minutes anyway, there would be little to do.

He threw both feet to the desk top, leaned back in the chair and permitted himself a few day dreams. Gee! Jane was such a swell kid. She deserved the best. And he was going to get it for her. Of course they weren't doing too badly now. Forty bucks a month rent for their house. Robbery. He was getting away with murder, Rod knew. But that was what came of working for a real-estate outfit. They had to get their help homes. Of course it wasn't the best. But then certainly it wasn't as bad as that old

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frame on Huggins Road. . . .

Rodney snapped his fingers suddenly. That old frame on Huggins Road! Didn't Mr. Gerard himself, at the meeting held the day before, mention a development to take place out there? Now if Gerard and Company could get hold of a strategic piece of property it could be used as a wedge for other pieces. . . ?

Rodney reached for the phone. He called an extension number and got Daniels, the sales supervisor. Could Rodney have a company car? Well, was it on company business? It was. Then Rodney could have a car.

THE day was nice with a sun not too hot. It was pleasant riding along, even in the bad traffic of the city. Rodney had but a single thought. If he could swing the sale of the property maybe it would be the break he had been banking on? Suddenly a street sign flashed by and Rodney began to pay more attention to his driving. The outskirts of the city were not far off.

The road off the main highway was gravel. And from its feel not too heavily traveled. Another point in his favor, Rodney thought. The road wound its way for a distance of a half mile between rows of spring flowers and unkempt hedges before it straightened out for its last stretch as it leaped to meet the main highway. And just before it straightened would be the spot where the old house stood, set back from the road a distance of a hundred yards or so and half-hidden from it by several stands of timber, mostly cottonwoods and poplar. Further, as though it had been done with deliberation, the owner had planted thick clusters of boxwood, to make the house even less to be seen since it was in a hollow.

There was a sort of path, or rut, leading up to the house. Rodney navigated the stretch carefully and parked the car to one side. Danged bushes! They marched right up to the very steps. He skirted them and mounted the steps. One was loose and snapped as he stepped on it. The sound made him start and he stopped for an instant, wondering why he felt this rising tide of, he groped for a word, and settled on, irritation. But at the back of his mind was another, one he couldn't voice, fear. . . .

Shutters imprisoned the interior in their slatted folds. There was a knocker on the door. It was covered with a faint film of rust, as from disuse. Rodney touched it gingerly, then firmly, and banged it against the iron. Nothing happened. Once more he banged at it. This time he heard the slight sound of footsteps from within. And after a second or so the door swung open creakily, but little more than a crack.

A voice, thin, reedy, asked:

"Yes? What is it?"

It was hard to say whether the voice was man's or woman's.

Rodney cleared his throat and said:

"My name is Rodney. . . ."

"Didn't ask your name," the voice broke in. "Asked what you want."

The words burst from Rodney in a flush of blinding anger:

"I want to buy your damned house, that's what I want!"

THERE was a short silence followed by an odd sound, a thin whine of sound which by a stretch of imagination could be called laughter. But before it had died away the door opened wide, only to show a dark void which held a feeling of ache in its depth.

"Come in, young man," the voice

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said now. "Come in. Man gets old and the young forget. Come in. . . ."

Light seeped in from somewhere and after Rodney's eyes had adjusted themselves to the semi-darkness, he saw more than the bent figure of the man before him. He was in a sort of foyer. He was facing a blank wall. There were doors to either side of it. The dim illumination was coming from beyond those doors. The figure of the man turned and started for the door at the left, calling as he did:

"Come along now. Come along. ."

When Rodney turned right after passing through the door he saw then that the wall was a sort of barrier between it and the huge room they had entered. The old man had scurried ahead into the room and was busy turning on the gas in two old-fashioned gas fixtures. The light they gave was weak but sufficient to see by. Bric-a-brac littered the room in confusion, furniture that was rococco in design and period was scattered helter-skelter. Confusion was the keynote of the place as if the room had never known the touch of an organizing hand.

The old man trotted to a two-seat plush sofa and motioned for Rodney to join him.

"It is so seldom I have company," the old man said in his piping voice. Then more quickly, "Oh. Not that I want it. Just that it's so seldom. Particularly young people."

Rodney's brain had been working full speed all the time the old man was talking. His senses were aware of odors, stale ones, musty as linens that had not known the dust rag for a long time; of feel, the stiff feel of the plush, the smooth grain of the mahogany, the odd feel of mould in the touch of the old man's trousers against the fingers of his right hand as it lay on the plush touching the trouser leg.

". . . So you want to buy this place eh?" the old man said.

Rodney shook himself. He gathered the other had been talking. "Uh, yes. I represent a real-estate company," Rodney said hastily as he brought his mind at attention. "We're thinking of developing this section. Is this place for sale?"

The old man turned full-face to Rodney and the gas light shown clear and strong on the bony structure, made pools of inky depths in the bright eyes, gave an oddly saturnine cast to the long thin face, hollowed the spaces between jawbone and cheekbone until the face looked skeletal.

"For sale? No!" the old man said. "Not for sale. But. . . Suppose you come along with me? I'd like to show the house to you. You may be luckier than you imagined when you drove up. Come along, now."

There was an old-fashioned staircase along one wall and the old man mounted it with nimble skipping steps. Rodney followed at a more leisurely pace. They arrived at a long and narrow hall at either end of which were tall narrow windows which like the lower ones, were screened by shutters. The old man lit another gas mantle and swung left. Rodney followed. They had but a couple of steps to go and the old man stopped before the first of a series of doors. He stooped, inserted a key in the lock and opened the door. Motioning with his head the old man stepped within the room. Rodney's eyes widened when he saw that the room was a vast library with bookshelves reaching from floor to ceiling and each shelf was crammed with books.

"Library," the old man said. "In-

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teresting books. Well, come along. . ."

There were eight rooms fronting the hall and Rodney saw seven of them, each a replica of the first, all filled from ceiling to floor with books. At last they came to the eighth. Here the old man turned to Rodney and said:

"You've read the story of Pandora and the box, I presume?"

"Yes."

"In this house this room is Pandora's box. Here is the key to it. . . ." I warn you. Never go into it. . . ."

"I don't get it," Rodney said. "Why are you giving me the key? And another thing, am I to think you're selling the house?"

"Not yet. There are several things which must be done before the house can be sold. You must spend two days here alone as a sort of warden over the property it contains. Of course you will have the run of the house. There are fine wines in the cellar and a wonderful delicacies to be had in the kitchen. I will return on the third day. If you have done well, I will sell the house to you—for a handshake. Only remember this. Do not go into this room. . . ."

RODNEY'S shoulders slumped. He knew he had made a mistake. From the first he should have known the old man was a bit off his top. All this talk but confirmed it.

He turned and without a word headed downstairs. The old man followed. Still not turning back Rodney went all the way to the outside door. But there the old man stopped him:

"Come tomorrow. I will leave tonight. The key will be under the mat. And remember, don't enter the eighth room! I will see you on the third day. . . ."

When Rodney Blake used a company car and business made him too late for the return to the office he drove the car home. This day he didn't bother returning to the office. Instead he went straight home. Jane heard his steps and met him at the door. Her smile went away when she saw the look on his face.

"What happened? Rod. . . ." she began.

But he moved past her without a word, hung his jacket up and went in the box-like living room. She followed and sat beside him on the sofa. Taking one of his large hands in her own small one, she asked again:

"What happened, hon?"

He told her everything from the moment he knocked on the door of the house until the instant he left.

He didn't know what reaction to expect, but certainly not the one he got, laughter. She trilled it in a thread of joyous sound. But it died quickly when she saw he wasn't even smiling.

"Well, don't take it like that," she said gently. "The old man was a little balmy, that's all. Forget it! After all, I'm surprised at you, Rod. Rooms full of books. A closed door hiding a fairy tale. Can't you see? He'd been living there for so long all alone that he isn't all there."

Rodney shook his head savagely. The feeling he had experienced as he used the knocker had been with him all the way home. Fear! A wordless formless baseless fear! And now it was here in the house with him, sitting here with his wife.

As though she read his mind, she said:

"So don't go back. Forget about it. There are other places for sale. . . ."

He pulled his hand from hers with a gesture so fierce and sudden it startled her.

"No! I'll go there tomorrow, just

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as he wanted me to. I know the value of the place. When Gerard hears of it and sees it, why, he'll think it's the biggest thing ever happened to the firm. It's as you say. The old guy's balmy. Jane! If I play my hand right and he does as he promised and sells it to me for a handshake I can make a pile of dough re-selling it to Gerard."

She smiled at his words. He sounded like his old self again. She rose, patted his cheek and said:

"That's my daddy talking. Now I'll get an early dinner for us. Syl and Joe Morgan would like us to stop in. Pinochle, I think. . . ."

"Pinochle! Why he's my chump, or should I say they're our chumps. We'll murder them. . ." Rod exclaimed.

THE evening was a success. Rodney and Jane won hands down. The cake, coffee and ice cream were just right. Everything was lovely. Only on their return and retirement, Rodney just couldn't fall asleep. Not for hours. And when he did it was to dream of a little man who kept banging at a knocker which had inexplicably appeared on Rodney's skull, and kept telling him that the skull was the entrance to Pandora's box.

What with the lack of sleep Rodney called the office and told the office manager he would be late because he was going to call directly on the sale prospect before coming down. But when he came down for breakfast Jane, seeing his haggard look, suggested his staying home.

"I got a better idea. I'm going to go down to the old place and stay there for the two days. He said there was plenty of food. Now wait, Jane," he forestalled the objections she was forming on her lips. "Look! I've been thinking it over. There won't be anything to it. I'll call the office later and explain, someway. Now, no more talk. . . ."

He kissed her, gave her a broad wink, and trotted down the steps to the car. The last thing he saw was her suddenly grave face as he swept down the street.

The key was under the mat, just as the old man had said it would be. But Rodney knocked anyway. Nothing. He opened the door. He started to cross the threshold but after the first step he came to a halt, the deepest feeling of foreboding sinking a shaft straight to his heart.

But the feeling was only of momentary duration. Setting his jaw and counseling himself that he was being childish, Rodney took the second step. The others were easier. He moved from room to room, touching a thing here and another there, sniffing again at the oddly acrid air of the place, and at times wondering where the old man had taken himself to. Among the first things he did was open the shutters wide, allowing the spring sunshine to lighten and brighten the rooms. He went upstairs, there to do the same with the shutters of the second story. He opened the doors of the seven rooms he had been given permission to, looked through some of the volumes and found there were some titles he hadn't read and carried them down to the kitchen which was the lightest room of all, and the most cheerful. There was a modern refrigerator standing in the corner, gleaming whitely sterile, and it was full of cold cuts and dairy dishes of all sorts. The cupboards held a full complement of cups, saucers and dishes. When he had done investigating the various cabinets Rodney knew he had no worries about food.

A sudden feeling of hunger pos-

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sessed him. Cutting several slices of ham from the half in the box he placed it between two pieces of bread, then pouring a glass of milk he took the meal he had made to the living room and settled himself for some reading.

The book was one he'd been meaning to read for a long time and for a short time he read with interest. Quite suddenly his eyes tired and he found it difficult to keep them open. They kept closing and no matter how often he willed them open, no sooner were the lids wide then a second later they'd snap shut again. After a bit he didn't bother fighting sleep.

When he woke the room was in complete darkness. He rolled his head on the head-rest of the sofa and saw that night had fallen. A strange lassitude filled his limbs. It was relaxing just to lie back this way, he thought. The book had fallen from his fingers and lay on the floor at his feet. Rodney felt his lips move in a twisted grin. There was something upstairs in one of those rooms he had to see . . . .

THERE was something odd about this, a thought groped its way into his mind. Those doors had been open—not this one though. What was it the old man had said he shouldn't do? He couldn't remember. There was something beyond the door, something in this room he had to get. . . . His fingers fumbled at the lock but it seemed to resist his efforts as though the thing had a will of its own. And suddenly it gave way and he stumbled into the room.

He narrowed his eyes, trying to pierce the mist that was like a grey curtain between him and objects in the room. The fog eddied like ectoplasm, now low, now high, but never still. Moving his hands before him as if he could feel his way through the mist. Rodney groped his way forward. And suddenly the mist was gone, fled through the open door. He could see now. Clearly. Nothing. . . No! There was something there. A table, seemingly suspended in air, and on it a box. The grin which had not left his lips from the instant he had awakened grew wider, more vacuous. There was something he knew he shouldn't do. But what it was escaped him. And besides, what did it matter?

It was a squarish box, simple in pattern, but with an elaborate lid of an embossed and figured enamel-like substance. He flipped the lid up with his fingers and peered down into it. A laugh bubbled up from the depths of his belly. **There wasn't a thing in the box, not a damned thing!**

Wait! There was something. . .He bent lower, then still not being able to see in the gloom (he hadn't opened the shutters) he brought the box up to his eyes. There was something there now, a picture. It was a picture of a man's face. And suddenly Rodney dropped the box and fled the room as though pursued by a devil. That picture. It was his own face he had been looking at. Yet not his face. For it was so distorted, so evil, so twisted by despair, so tortured by an inner madness that for a second he hadn't recognised it. But it was he and no one else. Of that Rodney Blake was certain.

He rushed wildly, blindly to the outer door only to find it locked. Yet he hadn't closed it. He tore at the knob wildly. It resisted his efforts as though it were possessed of a will of its own. His fingers became numb from the rigidness of their grip and lost their sense of feel and after a

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moment slipped from the rounded iron ball. Rodney staggered back from the door and fell panting against the wall, his eyes glaring in malevolent and helpless fury at the insensate thing.

BUT it did him little good and when his breathing was more even and his heart had stopped its wild beating, he straightened and tried the door again. It was still closed. This time he was more philosophic about it, and more reasoning. Since the key was in his own pocket and he hadn't locked the door when he stepped through it, something must have wedged itself somehow against it. Well, there were still other means of exit. But there weren't! Whoever had closed the doors had also slapped the shutters closed also. Rodney slammed his fist into his palm and cursed silently the ill-luck that was tagging him. Someone was playing tricks on him and he knew who it was. That old goon, that's who it was. Well, if he had to break every window in the place he was going to get out or know why. . . .

Only when he got to the windows and lifted his hand with the kerchief wrapped around it, he found he wasn't able to bring it forward. It was as if something was holding it back. The sweat popped out on his forehead in huge drops and the saliva was thick in his mouth. But though he strained his muscles to the utmost they were stiff and useless.

A great groan of despair was torn from him and for the first time in his life Rodney Blake felt the presence of the supernatural. It lay all about him and pressed him in its clammy fold. Once more he went back to the living room that was like a mausoleum, and dropped into the musty old chair with its faded plush cover.

How long he sat there he didn't know. But suddenly he was awake, yet did not remember when he had fallen asleep. He first felt the presence before him, then became aware of the man. It was the old man! Rodney sat erect, then leaped to his feet.

"I never thought I'd be glad to see you!" he shouted. "But by all that's holy, if you had the face of a worm I'd kiss it. . . ."

"So you found the box?" the old man said gently. "I thought you would. I thought your curiosity and cupidity would get the best of you. I was right. Now I am free and the box has another slave. May it treat you with a greater leniency than was shown me. . ."

"Wha-what do you mean?" Rodney bleated.

"Pandora's Box, you idiot!" the old man said without a change of voice. It was still gentle and still high-pitched, yet in it was a note of triumph. "You looked into it and discovered the face of a man, your face, only it wasn't your face, was it? No! It was something that will be your face because it will be what you will become! It is the mirror of your soul you looked into. . . ."

Rodney looked at the other with blank, uncomprehending eyes. He heard the words. They came from a vast d i s t a n c e, incomprehensible words, unbelievable words, words of doom and terror. Then his mind could take no more. The room swam before his eyes, the face of the old man faded from view and a black curtain descended before him. . . .

RODNEY Blake stirred and groaned as pain shot through his right arm. He shifted and felt the nylon cover of the car seat under

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him. Instantly he was awake.

He was sitting in the driver's seat of his car. The sun was shining brightly. To his right a few feet the shingle frame of the old house sent its shadow slanting across the car. Rodney stretched his arms to bring circulation back to normal. It was then he discovered he held a small object in his right hand. It was a key. He looked blankly at it trying to puzzle out how and where he got it. But his mind was simply blank insofar as the key's existence was concerned.

He got out of the car and strolled up the narrow, shrub-bordered path to the door. He inserted the key into the old-fashioned lock and turned. The door opened to the key's summons.

He walked from one room to another, analyzing the situation. Whoever had owned the place had let it run down to a bad state. Gerard and Company should be able to get it for a song. . . . He came back to the oddly-shaped foyer and started for the door but stopped at sight of an envelope on the small table at the center of the wall. There was writing on the face of the envelope. It was addressed to him. He opened it and looked at the deed it contained with an unbelieving stare. It was made out to him. **He was the owner of the house!**

It did not take Rodney Blake long to think of the profit he could make. If only he had some money. The house that was his was a fine cornerstone to a fortune. But he needed money. His fingers had been playing with the envelope as his mind worked in furious pace. Something crackled in his fingers. He looked into the envelope. There was a thin sheaf of bills in it. Each bill was for a thousand dollars and there were a hundred of them. One hundred thousand dollars! Enough to buy what he wanted.

For the next week Rodney Blake was busy. So busy Jane noticed the complete absorption of him, to the exclusion of all else. When he'd come down for breakfast in the morning he vouchsafed her a brief nod, taste of his food, and dash off without even a good-bye. And sometimes he would not return at night at all. When he would return he never spoke of where he had spent the evening before. She noticed other things about him. His face was thinning, becoming angular, his eyes narrowing and the mouth indrawn as if he were being consumed by an inner fire. More he was becoming secretive to an alarming degree.

There had never been a time that he had not told her what had gone on at the office, how he was doing, what accounts he had contacted, and what his prospects were for selling them. Now he said nothing, but immediately being through with his meal, retired to his den and locking the door, busied himself at whatever had become his affairs.

One day he came home and walking softly into the kitchen, (it was early in the afternoon and Jane was preparing dinner) said:

"Jane! Look here. . . ."

She turned with a startled cry and seeing him, said:

"You frightened me, dear. What is it?"

"Look at this. . . ." he was holding a slip of paper in his hand.

She stepped to his side and looked down at the paper, which proved to be a check. It was for a half million dollars, made out to Rodney Blake, and signed by the treasurer of Gerard and Company.

"My first big venture," he said in a low tone. "But not my last. I'm go-

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ing to be the richest man in the whole darned. . . ."

"Cemetery!" she said sharply. "What's happening to you? You were never money-mad. What's come over you? Look at yourself! Lord! It's as though you're another person. . . ."

AN inarticulate cry that was half-scream, half-moan rose to his lips at her words. And before she could even blink her eyes he struck her with his clenched fist, knocking her against the sink, from which she slid limply to the floor. Blood streamed from her mouth where the blow had landed, and her lips ballooned out in a monstrous swelling.

"I'll kick your teeth down your throat, if you say that again!" he shouted. "I'll tear your limbs from you! I'll kill you. . . .!"

Her head lolled limply on her shoulders and her eyes struggled to focus on her husband's face. She heard his words, but dimly, as from a long distance. Suddenly he was gone. Moaning in pain, she managed to get to her feet and set out after him at a staggering run. She was just in time to see him run into his den. But not in time to get to the door before he closed it. She threw herself on it, pounding with both hands at the wood and moaning:

"Rod!—Rod!— Please, honey. Open up. . . ."

And from within came the answer:

"Go away! Go away, damn you!"

There was something final in his voice, an inexorable command. Slowly her hands fell away from the wood, and turning, her head bent and her shoulders slumped in weariness and pain, she went back down the stairs to the kitchen where she sat, empty-faced and eyed, staring at the walls as though in their calcimined surfaces she could see her future.

Three hours later he came down. Jane had washed the blood from her mouth and had reduced the swelling to where it was barely noticeable. She was not the sort of woman who took things lying down. Yet she could not walk out on the man she loved without at least giving him a chance to make restitution. If this terrible thing which had come over him with all the suddenness of a typhoon could be made to vanish with the same speed she was going to do all in her power to speed that moment.

She heard his steps and walked into the living room where he was bound to see her. He started for the hall closet but seeing her seated at the table changed his direction and came into the room. He stood on the threshold and looked silently at her. There was menace in his look. She returned his glance, unafraid of him and the future.

"Keep your nose out of my business from now on," he said. "All that's going to be your affair is keeping the house in order and having meals for me when I get home. You'll always have a home, you'll always have money and clothes. But keep your nose clean and you and I'll get along just dandy. . . ."

That was all. He turned, and without another word, stepped out of sight.

THE business of his coming home drunk began that very night. Sleep had been impossible for Jane and she was awake when he staggered through the door. He didn't have to say a word. The odor of whiskey on him was so strong it sickened her. For the first time her resolution faltered. A sick man, yes, but an alcoholic was something else. He threw himself full length on the other twin

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bed and a groan of despair came out of him. She hesitated no longer but slipped from the warm comfort of her bed and stepped to his side. Some sixth sense told him of her approach. Without lifting his face from the pillow he mumbled fiercely:

"Get the devil away from me! I don't want you near me!" Then oddly "Please! Go away. . . ."

It was the first kindness he had shown her in more than a week. Yet in his very way of saying what he did was an acknowledgement of a terror greater than anything he'd ever known, at the same time, a denial of her help.

"Oh, darling!" there were tears in her eyes and in her voice. "Please, honey. Can't I help you in any way?"

His hand flew outward in a violent gesture which was not directed toward her but which struck her because she was directly in the way. It staggered her backward. But this time she came back for more. He still lay face down but his head was going from side to side as if asking her not to come to him. She stood for several seconds then turned and walked back to her bed. There were tears of compassion in her eyes and they fell in gentle drops to the cover. After a while she fell asleep. When she awoke he was gone.

From that night onward he never came home sober.

The following night she waited again until the hour was long past midnight. She sat alone at the dining room table waiting with the patience which some women develope, waiting for the welcoming sound of his footsteps. When she realized it was a helpless task she wearily got to her feet and started for the bedroom upstairs. Only she didn't quite reach it. The door to his den sort of swam into her vision. Jane Blake had never interfered in her husband's affairs in any way. Nor had she ever presumed to pry into his secrets. She broke the rule this night.

Once, when the outer door had closed on her while she had been hanging her wash, she hadn't been able to get in until Rodney came home. He made her get a master key for all the rooms. She put that key to use now. She felt a tremor in her limbs as the door opened silently. The darkness held a menace for her. The silence of the room frightened her. She wasn't aware of the tremble in her hand until she reached up to flick the wall switch. Light blazed suddenly, making her eyes blink.

She looked about. Everything seemed as it should be. His leather chair, the one they had their first quarrel over, (she had said it would be too warm in summer and too cold in winter) was in its accustomed place near the imitation fireplace; the desk held nothing except the familiar desk set, the books were all nicely in place; not a thing seemed out of place and everything in its place. . . But wait! What was that. . . .?

IT WAS half-hidden by the arm of the chair, as though it had been placed in such a position deliberately. But one corner of it reflected light from the chandelier and caught her attention. She came forward where she could see it fully and looked down at it with perplexity. She'd never seen it before. It was squarish, with a highly enameled cover which bore an odd Oriental design. Her fingers flipped the lid up and down as her mind busied itself in idle speculation about where Rodney had gotten hold of it. She gave the lid an extra hard flip and it went all the way up and

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stayed that way. She looked inside, but without curiosity, and seeing nothing but the blank face of the metal bottom, closed the lid. She moved over the desk next. Here, she found many odd papers, files of names, notations and memoranda, but all utter gibberish to her. Other than the fact that the desk was more cluttered than usual, and the odd case, there was nothing out of the way in the room.

But the odd case stuck in her mind. She learned more of it on a later night, much later, when Rodney came home with his first case of delirium tremens. He raved all through the night while she sat at his side and tried to puzzle through the maze of his ravings. There was something about a house, an old man, the enameled case, and a picture it was supposed to contain. The key to the puz- was given when he shouted:

"That room—I shouldn't have opened the door—he warned me! — I shouldn't have . . ." The rest was gibberish.

She knew then that it was not in her house the secret lay. It was in the frame house on Huggins Road. She wouldn't have thought it the seat of her trouble if he hadn't shouted at the end just before he fell into a troubled sleep:

"I won't go back there! I won't!"

A terrible thought came to her mind then. It came and left. But it was to return three days later. . .

THE sergeant's name was Fleming. He had told Mills, the other cop, to keep the others along the wall while he talked to the two men who knew most about the murder. The first, a short stocky man, the bartender, had seen the whole thing . . . .

"Sure I know the guy. Been comin' in here for a couple of weeks now . . .

"Know his name?" Fleming asked.

"Blake. Rodney Blake."

"And the other guy, the old one . . .?"

A shoulder shrug was all the answer he got to that.

"So okay. Just what happened?"

"They came in together and sat at the same table they always use, the one at the end. Joe here started shoving the drinks up to them . . ."

Fleming turned to the other of the two who had seen the murder, a slender man who needed a shave and from the lack of color in his face a couple of transfusions, and bit out sharply:

"Were they arguing about anything while you were waiting on them?"

"They was allus arguin'," the man said. "Never se'ed them come in but the young guy wasn't yellin' somethin' or other . . ."

"I mean anything specific?" Fleming stopped the other short.

"Same ole thing. Somethin' about a broad named Pandora and her box. Allus arguin' about how much this dame is doin' for the young guy an' how little he appreciates it. But if you ast me, I don't like the old guy. 'Cause whatever he's talkin' about's a dig, it ain't straight."

"Sure!" the bartender supplemented what the waiter said. "A couple of times I thought the young guy was going to give the old man his lumps. But the other guy must have had something on young Blake. Some thing about this Pandora woman."

Fleming digested the information in silence for a few seconds. Mills returned then with a handful of articles he'd taken from the dead man's pockets.

"Holy smoke!" Mills had awe in his voice. "This guy was a walking bank. His wallet's full of grand notes.

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Two hundred of them."

Fleming pursed his lips. This took things out of the ordinary homicide class. It wasn't every man who carried that sort of money with him. He turned his head for another look at the man on the floor. There were lines of evil in the face, avarice stared from the empty eyes, bitterness had etched its mark in the mouth: it was the face of a young man who had assumed the mask of another, a more vicious man. But Mills had something of even greater importance to tell.

"Somethin' fishy about this," he said. "Maybe Blake wasn't murdered after all. There ain't a mark on him for one thing, and for another I been talking to one of the stiffs who was sitting right across from him and he says Blake suddenly looked at the old guy, smiled and kind of leaned on the old man and then fell down off the stool."

"Then what made you guys think it was murder?" Fleming whipped around to the two he had been questioning.

"The old guy said it was," the bartender said. "He yelps, 'I killed him!' and laughs and before any of us could do anything he beats it out the front door."

"Sure," said the waiter. "I heard it too. An' I heard more than that. I heard what they were talking about just before that. I just got through serving the young guy, and boy, how he could guzzle the stuff. . . Anyhow, he was sayin' that he couldn't take it anymore. He was going to kill himself. The old guy laughed and said, "I'm the one who has that power. I and the mist . . ."

"Mist?" Fleming asked.

The waiter shrugged. He knew nothing about the mist except that it had been mentioned. "Yep! That's what the old guy said. Then he said, 'I told you not to go into the eighth room . . .' Gees! They was allus talkin' about this place with the eight rooms . . ."

Fleming whirled on Mills and asked if he had found Blake's address among the cards. Mills had. Fleming told Mills to call the station and get the meat wagon while he and the driver chased out to Blake's home. Fleming had an idea that perhaps Blake's wife might know something about it.

But Mills had another idea.

"Why not go out to the house Blake was always talking about? The address is on one of the cards . . ."

"How the hell do you know it's the house?"

"That's what card called it, Pandora's house."

Fleming didn't wait to hear more. He was already running toward the police car parked at the curb. He had the card clutched in his thick fingers.

THEY met the fire engines as they turned in the snow-packed gravel road and raced ahead of them toward the flame-shot sky a half mile down. The frame house was a sheet of fire which escaped form every window with an odd violence. Several pieces of fire apparatus were already there. Fleming raced up to the battalion chief, shoved his badge in the fireman's face and asked how it had happened.

"Incendiary," said the other shortly. "Gasoline spilled all over the place . . ."

"Anybody in there?" Fleming asked.

"Yep. Got him out but he was a goner. Layin' over there. Take a look," the chief suggested.

Fleming pulled back the rough

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blanket and took a long look at the face of the uncovered man. It was a young face, innocent, with full lips curling in the sweetest and happiest smile he had ever seen. Fleming returned to the fire chief.

"What did he die of?" Fleming asked.

"I don't know," came the astonishing answer. "We found him sitting on a sofa. He was smiling just like you see him there. And he was dead already . . ."

"Murder . . .?" Fleming asked in a low voice

"Search me. I'd say heart failure. First time I saw murder being smiled at."

The woman walked slowly up the short walk toward her door. Her head was bent and words stumbled from her lips:

"There were only seven rooms, not eight. I looked and looked. And they were all empty. Oh, Rod!" the last was a deep cry of great anguish. "What happened in that old place? Why did you tell me there were eight rooms? What was that thing that flowed from the window that shouldn't have been there? I counted them. There were eight windows. And something like a mist came out of one of them. What was it? Was that what made you like that, Rod? Now it's gone! It's dead, the house, the mist and maybe the terror . . ."

She fumbled in her bag for her key and finding it opened the door. She switched on the hall light and walked slowly up to the second story. Why she made for his den she didn't know. But something unbidden made her. She opened the door and turned on the light. It looked exactly as it had the last time she saw it. She moved to his chair and her fingers caressed the leather of the seat. An electric shock made her jerk her fingers away from it. She looked at it, wide-eyed. The leather was warm, as if someone had been sitting in it not too long before. She turned suddenly her eyes searching for the box. It was gone! Rod had been here. She turned and ran screaming down the stairs:

"Rod! Rod, where are you?"

She ran screaming like that full into the arms of Fleming who came up the walk.

". . .Yes! I set fire to the house. It was the cause of all our misery. If Rod had never seen it he would be alive today. That's what did it, that and the box, the one he called Pandora's Box . . ."

She hadn't noticed Fleming had a package under his arm. He had laid it on the table when he brought her in the house and made her take a drink of the brandy in the pantry. He brought it out where her eyes could focus on it. It was a squarish box with a top from which all the enamel had been burned off.

"Is this the box Mrs. Blake?" Fleming asked.

She looked at it and shook her head. Fleming pushed the lid open and looked in. There was nothing there—wait! There was something there. A picture. It seemed pasted to the bottom. He pried it loose with his finger nail. It came free quite easily. He showed it to her and her eyes went wide in a startled look. Then they flooded with tears and her voice choked out:

"Rod! Honey! It's his picture."

"How long ago was that taken, Mrs. Blake?" Fleming asked gently.

"Just a couple of months ago . . ."

FLEMING looked at the picture and his face became a little grey-

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REGGIE and the VAMPIRE

Being a vampire was a silly sort of business, Reggie thought. But then, he had never met any vampires . . .

REGINALD van Mellowpate, the third, was in his usual high spirits as he descended to the dining room of his club. He had slept like a babe and now, showered, shaved and attired in a natty new gabardine suit, he was dwelling fondly on the prospects of a leisurely breakfast.

He beamed at the elderly elevator operator.

"Fine morning, isn't it?" he said, rocking back and forth on his heels exuberantly.

"It's two in the afternoon," the elevator operator said coldly. He considered Reggie van Mellowpate a ridiculous young idiot, an opinion which was hardly an exclusive or original one. Everyone thought the same about Reggie, although it was conceded grudingly that he was harmless.

"Ha!" Reggie said cheerfully. "Two in the afternoon, eh? Kind of a jolt. Man gets up, flexes the old biceps, ready for a fine day. Finds it's half over. Well, well." He searched about in the roomy regions of his head for a fitting comment to sum up his attitude about the situation. "A rolling stone, you know," he chuckled and feeling that he had capped the conversation neatly, he left the elevator with a warm glow of pride in his own cleverness.

The dining room steward led him

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by Gerald Vance

The Count smiled politely as Reggie bowed and said: "I've come in regards to your ad."

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to his accustomed table and brought him the morning paper and a breakfast menu. Reggie was looking for the comics when the club manager, an impressively dressed, graying gentleman with a carnation in his buttonhole, sat down at his table.

"Ah!" Reggie said, blinking at him. "Great morning, isn't it?"

The club manager said, "Afternoon, you mean?"

Reggie snapped his fingers. "Just had that out with the elevator boy. Silly to forget." He had a vague recollection of having said something quite clever about it at the time, but now he couldn't recall the exact, pungent phrase. He decided dolefully that it would come to him later, but probably in a situation where it wouldn't fit so brilliantly.

"Now, Reggie," the club manager said, "I've got to mention again that matter we discussed last month."

Reggie frowned painfully. Last month was an remote to him as the Punic Wars. "Yes," he said, feeling his way along, "I think we should. Bring us up to date and all that."

The club manager sighed. He looked at Reggie, feeling as always a giddy sense of disbelief that this lean, vacant, yellow-haired young man had lived twenty-five years without encountering some macabre sort of violence.

"It's your dues and house account," he said, quietly, with the soothing tone one might use with an irresponsible child. "You haven't paid your club bills for the past four months. This can't go on, Reggie."

"Decidedly not," Reggie said, indignantly. He looked sharply at the manager and nodded firmly. "The idea! Behind, eh? Four months, you say. You're probably right. No reason for you to lie about a simple thing like that. Now let's go on to what you wanted to say to me?" He felt virtuously pleased at settling that first matter so decisively.

"Reggie, that is the whole thing. You owe the club four months back dues. You've got to pay us the money, or explain when you can pay it. Do you understand?"

"OH, right! Righto." Reggie forced himself to concentrate. He had great confidence in his powers of concentration. Just look at the thing straightaway, and give it a good mulling over. That was the ticket. He mulled. Finally it came to him, the final definite answer. He smiled.

"I can't ever pay you," he said.

"Now, that's no answer. You can't stay on here forever without paying, Reggie. Now listen and try to understand. Your father was a charter member of this club, and you've been a member all your life. We respect that, and we want to treat you with consideration. But we can't keep you here indefinitely unless you settle your bills." The manager found himself talking in a high, frantic voice, and he stopped and ran a finger inside his collar. He was getting overheated. "Now," he went on, "the things you get here, such as food, liquor, valet service and so forth, cost money. We pay for them during the month and you pay us back at the end of the month. Is that all clear?"

Reggie was quite clear about it, and that knowledge made him feel very shrewd. He nodded and tried to look sharp and business-like. "Righto. You pay during the month, I pay at the end. I always thought it must work that way. Never was quite sure, though. Meant to ask about it several times. Now we have it clear."

"Yes. But you haven't been paying

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us at the end of the month. I reminded you last month, and it's my painful duty to do so again."

"Silly to be pained about it. Let's drop it altogether if you feel uncomfortable. Might be best all around, hey?"

"I can't drop it. It's my job to see that you pay us. Now what do you mean you can never pay us?"

"Oh." Reggie remembered saying that, and now he frowned and thought about what he could have meant. Oh, yes.

"You see it's this way," he said, concentrating mightily. "The old bean —the pater, that is,—left quite a bundle of money. And he put it all away in a most complicated fashion. Frightfully complicated. There was some of the stuff lying loose in banks and some of it in stocks and then there were buildings he owned and things of that sort. It was all explained to me when he died, and I saw right away that it was all shipshape so I let some people he knew take care of everything. Now." Reggie picked up a fork and pointed it at the manager. "Every week I got a check for fifteen hundred dollars? Got that?"

"Yes," the manager said in a hushed voice. "I have it."

"Fine. Then the checks stopped. Quite a while ago." Reggie put the fork down and sat back in his chair. "You see, there it is. In the old nutshell. No more checks. Naturally, I can't pay you?"

"But that is precisely the difficulty," the manager said desperately. "What in the name of heaven happened to your father's money?"

Reggie chuckled. "Ha! That's a good one. The loose stuff and the stocks and the buildings all disappeared. The pater wouldn't give the stuff to me, and now look what's happened." He broke into a high, cheerful laugh. "Shows you how silly people can be, doesn't it?"

"How could buildings disappear?" the manager asked in a strangling voice.

"Oh, I don't mean they went pouf! and blew away. Some other blokes got them away from these people my father had handling them. Some joke on them, eh? And some joke on the pater, eh?"

"Did it ever occur to you that it's a little joke on you, too?"

"On me? No, sir. I wasn't handling the stuff, see? The joke is on them."

"All right, the joke is on them," the manager said frantically. "But how about the situation now. Have you thought of going to work?"

"Who would hire me?" Reggie said, chuckling. "Silly idea, eh?"

THE manager got to his feet slowly. He hoped his knees wouldn't buckle. With a strangled sob he tottered to the stairway and went to his office.

Reggie resumed his pursuit of the comics. He ate his usual hearty breakfast and then went leisurely down to the lobby to enjoy his after-breakfast cigarette. He passed the manager in the lobby and nodded pleasantly. The manager started nervously and hurried away.

Reggie glanced after him, frowning. The fellow was upset, he thought. Probably working too hard. He sighed and sat down in his customary chair.

A club porter awakened him ten minutes later with the information that he was wanted on the phone. Reggie hurried to the lobby booth.

"Ah, Good morning," he said.

"It's afternoon, you know."

The voice was a girl's, a very won-

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derful girl, and Reggie felt cheered at the very sound of her clear, light tones. The girl was Alicia Northrop and Reggie was extremely fond of her.

"Right you are," he said, feeling vaguely that he had gone through this afternoon business before. "And how are you, pet?"

"Fine, Reggie. You're seeing me tonight, remember?"

"Oh, decidedly."

"I just wanted to make sure. Reggie, have you thought over last night yet?"

"Last night? Ah, yes. Gave it a good mull first thing this morning."

"Well, what did you decide?"

Reggie looked blankly at the receiver. "About what?"

"Oh, Reggie!" Alicia's voice was a blend of disappointment and exasperation. "Don't you remember what we discussed after you brought me home?"

"Now wait a minute!" Reggie thought hard. He had taken Alicia home. They had gone in for a nightcap. Yes, it was all coming back. "Was it about my new suit?" he asked hopefully. "We talked about that, didn't we?"

"Yes, we talked about that. Also, I believe we talked of getting married."

"Oh, my gracious. Of course we did." Reggie cursed himself for an ass. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"I thought so last night. Reggie, I do love you. But do you remember what I said about working?"

"Working?" Reggie's mind was blank, but he was determined to bluff it through. "Of course, pet. And I think the idea of your working is ridiculous. Told you so last night, didn't I?"

"We talked about **your** working," Alicia said ominously. "I said I wouldn't marry you unless you got yourself a job. Remember?"

"Ah, yes," Reggie said uneasily.

"Well, this morning I found an ad in the paper by someone who needs a young man. I think you should look into it."

"Yes, yes, by all means." Reggie had the sensation that he was being mysteriously encircled. "Yes, I'm young, after all."

"Now take down this address. The ad said that it was a position for a desperate young man, and I think you're desperate, Reggie."

"Oh, absolutely. Positively frantic."

Alicia gave him the address. He copied it down on the back of a bill his tailor had sent him a week ago. The address was on the West side in a questionable neighborhood, but Reggie decided sorrowfully that if a man had to work he might as well work anywhere.

When he hung up, after setting a definite date for that night, he went directly to his room, picked up his hat and coat and went back down to the street. Waiting for a cab he began to feel a little better about the prospects of going to work. He supposed that actually lots of people had worked at one time or another. Hardly anything to be worried about, he told himself as he climbed into a cab.

THE address the driver took him to was a brownstone house, set in rows of similar and equally drab dwellings.

Reggie paid the driver and went confidently up the worn steps. The heavy door opened as he was ready to knock, and a young man burst out, his eyes glaring wildly. He looked unseeingly at Reggie, then dashed down the steps.

Reggie heard him mutter hoarsely:

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"I'm not that desperate."

Reggie watched him running down the street, and he remembered that the ad had specified a position for a desperate young man. This distraught chap must have been an applicant for the very job Reggie was coming to see about. Considerably heartened that the competition was melting away, so to speak, Reggie knocked firmly on the door.

It was opened an instant later by a hulking giant in a somber black suit. Small, green eyes gleamed at Reggie from under thick black eyebrows.

"I'm here about the ad," Reggie said.

The giant laughed, rather horribly, Reggie thought.

"Follow me," he said, grinning now and stepping back from the door.

"Righto," Reggie said.

He followed the huge man down a long corridor and into a wide, high-ceilinged, dimly-lit room. The giant motioned Reggie to a chair and then, with a last chuckle, disappeared through another door.

Reggie sat down gingerly and glanced about. The room was hung with black velvet drapes, criss-crossed with slashing red stripes. There was no carpeting, and very little furniture Reggie noted idly that there were no mirrors anywhere in the room. He considered this a good thing. He didn't like mirrors, because he didn't understand them.

The door opened again and a tall man dressed in evening clothes entered. He was rubbing his hands together in a pleased fashion.

"Let me welcome you to my poor lodgings," he said, in a soft, graciously-modulated voice. "You are here about the ad, I understand?"

"Yes," Reggie said boldly, deciding not to lie about the matter. "Thought I'd best put my shoulder to the wheel, do a bit of toiling and so forth."

"You are desperate?" The question was asked in an expectant voice.

"Oh, very." Reggie laughed lightly. "End of the rope and so forth."

"Ah, excellent!"

The man sat down on the couch beside Reggie, smiling quietly now. "I am Count Ravenic. I hope we can be mutually helpful to each other."

Reggie had a better chance to study the count now and he saw that his prospective employer had a strong, rather moody face, with straight black hair and eyes that were deep and luminous. He wore beautifully tailored evening clothes with a crimson baldric cutting diagonally across his white shirt front.

"Now, young man," he said, "Perhaps I'd better tell you why I advertised for a desperate young man." He paused and his strange magnetic eyes gleamed at Reggie with the power of a strong beacon. "I am a vampire," he said softly. "Does that horrify you?"

Reggie didn't know quite what to say. The Count apparently expected him to be shocked, but for his life Reggie couldn't understand why. He had heard of vampires; but he couldn't remember just what they were. He tried to steer a middle course.

"It's all a question of viewpoint," he said, nonchalantly. "I just don't horrify very easily. One of my best friends is a Socialist, as a matter of fact."

"You are not frightened then?"

"You know," Reggie said, seriously now, "It takes a fearful amount of brain power to be frightened. A chap has to understand a lot to be afraid."

"You are not afraid then, because

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you are stupid?"

Reggie laughed and slapped the count's shoulder. "Couldn't have put it more neatly myself. Now what's on your mind?"

THE count was smiling thoughtfully. "Perhaps you are the very man I need. Briefly, here is my proposition. I need a new body. I am willing to pay handsomely for a young body, to be consigned to me in one month's time. Are you interested?"

Reggie opened his mouth in astonishment. "You mean you'd pay for my body?"

"Very generously."

Reggie chuckled and shook his head incredulously. "Oh, I say, you'd get the worst of the bargain. The old frame is pretty shot. No stamina, no red corpuscles, none of the old vigor and strength left at all. You know I tried for six teams in college, never made one."

"That isn't important," the count said impatiently.

"Well, what's wrong with the body you've got," Reggie said. "You look pretty shipshape to me. Good shoulders, no fat, probably teeming with red corpuscles. No, it just doesn't make sense."

"Listen to me a moment," the count said, dabbing at his forehead with a handkerchief. "I am from Austria. For years I enjoyed myself there, living quietly and pleasantly. Then, through no fault of my own, I incurred the enmity of a very powerful man in the area. A man whose command of the nether spirits was greater even than my own. I was forced to flee to this country. But my nemesis pursues me still and one day he will find me. I must change my appearance before that day, or I will be eternally lost. Do you understand now why I want a new body, even a pitiful one like yours?"

"Oh, righto," Reggie said, nodding vigorously. "I see how it stands now. Clear as rain. You want my body so this chap won't recognize you?"

"Precisely." The count leaned forward eagerly. "And what do you say?"

Reggie thought it over. He gave it a good mull, but he couldn't get it clear. "Do I get your body?" he asked dubiously.

"Ah, no!" The count sighed regretfully. "You get no body at all."

"I see," Reggie nodded. Somehow, that information seemed to clear things up.

"However, I am prepared to pay you handsomely for your sacrifice," the count said. "You get money and thirty days in which to wind up your affairs."

"How much money?" Reggie asked shrewdly.

"Twenty-five thousand dollars."

Reggie tugged at his lip.

"Thirty thousand!"

Reggie felt a glow of pride. He was driving a hard bargain.

"Forty thousand!"

"I'm not worth that much," he said modestly.

"Then you'll take it?"

Reggie thought about it again. He had told Alicia he would get a job; but getting money was practically the same thing. And while he knew nothing about wages he figured it might take a man weeks to make forty thousand dollars.

"Righto!" Reggie said. He felt as if he had taken the count for a nice lump. This working was a snap, he realized.

AFTER signing a long paper which he didn't bother to read,

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and going through a ridiculous ceremony in which the count pricked his wrist with a needle and transferred a few drops of blood to a cut in his own wrist, Reggie collected his money and left the gloomy room. He was in a wonderful frame of mind.

That night he took Alicia to a very swanky joint where they dined elegantly on terrapin and champagne. Alexia was a slim blonde, with fine sensitive features and candid eyes. She watched Reggie ordering Cherries Jubilee for a dessert and there was a worried line across her forehead.

"Where did you get the money?" she finally said bluntly.

"Oh, the filthy stuff," Reggie said. "You mean the dirty old green. Well, it's a long dull story. Wouldn't interest you, at all."

"I think it would," Alicia said dryly.

"Well, it's this work business. I put my mind to it and collected quite a bundle of the stuff. Clever of me, wasn't it?"

Alicia's eyes opened in astonishment. "You mean someone has paid you for working?"

"That's it, in the old nutshell."

"Reggie, I can hardly believe it. It's hard to believe anyone would actually pay you."

"Silly, isn't it? But that's the way it worked out."

"Reggie, now we can get married."

Reggie blinked at her, then remembered. "Why, of course," he said, delightedly. "Wonderful idea. Odd it hasn't occurred to me before this."

Alicia smiled at him and shook her head helplessly.

The next few weeks went by pleasantly for Reggie. In addition to his pile of ready money, he had been unexpectedly lucky in a few chance business ventures. An acquaintance of his at the club was a grain broker, and during a drunken evening in the men's bar one night, Reggie pressed ten thousand dollars on his friend with the injunction that he buy him some grain.

He thought no more of the matter, until his friend stopped him in the lobby a few days later.

"Seen the stock reports today?" he asked.

Reggie said, "No. Something cute happening?"

His friend laughed. "Take a look. You'll see what's doing with the stock I bought for you."

Reggie caught his friend's arm. "Look, old man, just give me the facts. You know, I can't read the stock reports. All those little names and figures confuse me."

"Well, you've made about two hundred percent profit as of today. I think I'd better sell you out while you're ahead."

"Quit while I'm winning?" Reggie was indignant. "We'll do no such thing."

"Okay," his friend said, shrugging. "It's your money."

Encouraged by this, Reggie bought stock in a new drug company. He tripled his money in a week.

Everything was rosy. His marriage had been set for the end of the month in spite of the depressing fact that his prospective father-in-law was angrily and loudly disgusted with his daughter's choice in men.

Reggie ignored this, feeling that his father-in-law was probably right after all. Alicia was a bit of a fool to marry him, he decided reasonably.

Then one afternoon as he was leaving the club for a tea date with Alicia his arm was caught in a painfully powerful grip. Reggie glanced around and recognized the beetle-browed gi-

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ant he had encountered in the count's home. That all seemed a long time ago now.

"You will come with me," the giant said. "My master will speak with you."

"Now look, old chap," Reggie said, "I'll have to make it some other time. I have a date with—"

"YOU will come now," the count's huge servant said. There was a limousine waiting at the curb, door open. Reggie was pushed toward it, helped into the rear. The giant clambered in beside him and the car moved forward with a rush of power. . . .

The count was waiting for him in the same gloomy room, attired as before in evening clothes. He smiled with pleasure as he saw Reggie.

"So nice of you to come to see me," he murmured. "I felt it wise to advise you that your month is up the day after tomorrow. You have settled your affairs?"

Reggie sat down and scratched his chin. "The whole thing rather slipped my mind, you know. Come to think of it, I've decided to keep my old frame. I'm attached to it now. Sorry and all that, but you'll have to find someone else." He smiled sympathetically at the count.

The count returned his smile, and the gloomy light in the room touched his long, white teeth. "So you've changed your mind, eh?"

"Yes," Reggie laughed. "Just changed my mind."

The count stood and smiled down at Reggie, but there was no humor in his smile. "That is unfortunate. We made a bargain, however, and I'm afraid I must insist that you fulfill your end of the terms. Moro—that is my faithful servant—would be forced to break your neck if you displeased me. And there are other things he might do to you, far more unpleasant than merely breaking your neck, should I tell him to."

Reggie chewed his lips. He hadn't thought this thing through very carefully. Here he was, ready to marry Alicia, and now he had to give up his body. Rum thing. She'd be furious.

"How about a bit more time?" he said, hopefully.

"That is impossible. My enemy is closer to me than ever before. Time is short. I must escape into your body immediately. Now tonight you must take me about to your friends, tell me of your life and background, so that I can take over your existence."

"You mean you're going to really pretend to be me?"

"For a short while. Then I will let it be known that you—I, in actuality, —are taking a trip. That way I will disappear."

"And you want to meet all my friends?"

"Just enough so that I can create the deception that I am you for a while. Now, I suggest, we start at it as soon as possible."

"You mean right away?"

"Precisely," the count said, smiling. . . .

Reggie took the count first to his club. After checking their coats, Reggie led him down to the men's bar.

"Most of my friends live here at the club," Reggie said gloomily. He was realizing that he wouldn't be seeing them anymore and it saddened him. He thought of Bojo Nelson, who had stolen his ties one summer, and felt better. If he never saw Bojo again that would be fine.

AT THE bar he ordered two scotch and sodas. The count moved to one side of the big bar mirror, and

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gently pulled Reggie along with him.

"I don't like mirrors, you see," he explained. "Now, where are your friends? Perhaps you'd best introduce me as a friend you met in Europe. You've been there, I presume?"

"Yes," Reggie said absently. He glanced about the warm, cosy room, and saw a group of his chums playing poker at a corner table. "Come on," he said.

He walked across to the table and said, "Greetings, chums. Like you to meet a friend of mine, Count Ravenic from Europe."

No one at the table looked up.

"Playing cards, eh?" Reggie said cheerfully. "Mind if I sit in?"

The dealer glanced at him sourly. "Go away, limp brain."

The count glanced uneasily at Reggie, but Reggie was unshaken. "Grand game, cards. Turn of the wheel, fortune's smile and all that rot." He peered over the dealer's shoulder and whistled admiringly. "Fortune's smile, I say!"

The dealer put his cards down slowly and nodded to the other man at the table. "Will you excuse me?"

"I was just leaving myself," another said, with a pointed look at Reggie.

The five men got to their feet and walked out of the bar. Reggie glanced at the count. "Great bunch of fellows," he said warmly.

The count fingered his chin thoughtfully. "Those are your friends?" he inquired softly.

"The true blue ones," Reggie said. "Some of the chaps here aren't so cordial. But that bunch is top of the hole. Another drink?"

"I think not," the count said. "You said you were being married. Perhaps we should meet the young lady, and her family?"

"Righto," Reggie said, with a sigh. "Understand, the prospective pater-in-law is an old buzzard. He doesn't like me very well."

"Really?" the count said drily.

They drove to Alicia's home in a cab. Alicia's father had made a vast amount of money in Steel, and upon retiring had built a magnificent home North of the city. It was set back several hundred yards from the road, and the graveled approach was lined with impressive trees. The house itself was built on the lines of Buckingham Palace.

Nevvins, the butler, opened the door.

"Good evening and all that stuff," Reggie said. "Miss Alicia home?"

"She has not returned as yet," Nevvins said. "However, Mr. Northrop wishes to see you."

"Oh, fine," Reggie said limply.

Nevvins took his and the count's coat with ill-concealed distaste, then led through massively furnished halls to great double doors. He knocked discreetly, and when a hoarse noise sounded from inside the room, he opened the door and said: "Mr. van Mellowhead and friend, sir."

"Send that young jackass in!" a great voice roared.

REGGIE glanced despairingly at the count, then shrugged his shoulders and marched into the room. The count followed him.

Alexander Northrup stood by a high mantle over which was hung a prodigious Moose head. Alexander Northrop had much in common with his Moose head trophy. He was immensely built, his face was long, his eyes glared, and his voice was undoubtedly superior to any Moose alive or dead. He ran a hand now through his shock of grizzled hair and advanced on Reggie with the ponder-

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ous inevitability of a Sherman Tank.

"You!" he bellowed, pointing a finger the size of a banana at Reggie. "You miscreant! You jackass, you idiot! Alicia has phoned, said you stood her up. By Gad, you'll get over those habits before entering my family, you miserable young jackanapes. Where have you been?"

"I—I was busy," Reggie said weakly.

"Ha!" Alexander Northrop swung about and glared at the count. "And who is this man?"

"A—a friend of mine," Reggie said hastily. "Count Ravenic."

"He's got a fishy eye," Alexander Northrop said loudly. "Fishy eye," he repeated. Ignoring the count's nervously outstretched hand, he swung back to Reggie. "Now, listen to me, you little fool! Alicia wants to marry you, thereby proving she inherited her mother's lack of intelligence. But, by Gad, I'll see that she's happy, if I have to break you into pieces and re-shape you into something that looks like a man. If you ever worry her I'll track you to the ends of the earth. If you ever run off, or disappear, or fade out of the picture, or take an extra drink, well, you'll wish you'd been boiled in oil when I get through with you."

Still glaring, Alexander Northrop backed to his chair and picked a long bull whip from the floor.

"See this!" he shouted.

He snapped the twelve foot whip into the air and let it snap past Reggie's ear with an explosive crack.

"You'll get a taste of that the next time you worry my little girl. She's waiting for you now where you were supposed to meet her. Get down there you cur, and take this fishy-eyed stick of wood with you."

The whip snapped again and Reggie dashed from the room with the count at his heels. The cab was waiting and they piled into the back in a rush. The count gave the driver an address and the cab leaped forward.

They were silent until the nighttime lights of the city's downtown section appeared before them, and then Reggie let out his breath and smiled weakly.

"Excitable old chap, eh? But don't worry, you'll get used to him."

The count shuddered.

Reggie, feeling more cheerful now, babbled on: "Thing is, he thinks a lot of Alicia. Loving father, and all that. Makes him a bit difficult at times."

THE cab drew up to the address the count had given the driver, and Reggie was surprised to note that it was the count's home.

He sighed. "I suppose we make the old switch now, eh? You take over the frame and all that."

The count opened the door and got out quickly. He stared at Reggie with something like horror in his eyes. "No, no," he said, shrilly. "I have troubles, but not like yours. That body of yours would be a curse. I would inherit the friends who hate you, and that old man who is a devil. Anything is better than that."

"Now wait a minute," Reggie said indignantly. "I . . ."

"Farewell. Make no attempt to find me."

The door slammed and the count ran into his house. Reggie heard a door slam, a bolt click with finality.

The driver looked over his shoulder. "Where to, buddy?"

Reggie frowned thoughtfully. There was something he had to do. Ah, that was it. . . .

He gave the driver the address where he had been supposed to meet

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Alicia, then settled back comfortably.

"Queer chap," he mused, thinking of the count. "Probably a nervous type."

He made a resolve to look up vampires in the dictionary.

(The End)

HILDY FINDS HIS WINGS

(Concluded from Page 101)

A wondrous smile of pride and joy lighted the features of the Recorder. All of the Heavenly messengers came under his jurisdiction. He was directly responsible for their actions.

"No," he said. "You are not the Supreme Judge. But you are from now henceforth to sit on his right hand. For surely you acted in a manner fit for such an honor.

"Aye! You did aquit yourself nobly. There is a Heaven on every Earth. And sometimes, as in the case of those few whom you attended, the feet of mortals must be set in the proper paths. Your deed was not great, nor were the people whom you helped the famous. But they were the stuff from which Angels are made . . . Go! And be proud and humble in the small accomplishments which have brought you honor . . . ."

(The End)

THE KEY

(Concluded from Page 117)

er. The picture was of a young man, with a bright, smiling face. Certainly not the face of the man in the tavern. The light from the overhead fixture brought his attention to something within the box. There was some sort of writing in it. He brought the box closer to his eyes and for a second read what the writing said. Then it faded from view.

". . . To each will come the picture of what he will be. To each will be shown his destiny. Only the free of soul will have no fear. The others will become slaves of the box . . ."

Fleming wet his suddenly dry lips. He dropped the box as a wild scream shot from the woman's lips.

"The picture! It's gone!"

Fleming looked down at his hand. Grey dust filtered through his spread fingers. The same fingers which had held only an instant before the picture of Rodney Blake . . .

Rodney Blake felt the dark steal over him like a sheltering blanket. He knew he had come back here to get something. Then he was to go away somewhere, to a place of eternal peace. His fingers slipped from the chair arm and struck against a cold something. A sigh escaped him. Pandora's box. That was it! He flipped the lid open. His fingers searched out the picture on the bottom and lifted it to where he could see it. And though the darkness was as of the tomb, he could see quite clearly. It was a nice young face, pleasant and likeable, he was looking at. The face of Rodney Blake. He placed the picture back and put the box down.

His hand went into his trouser pocket then and took out an odd-looking key. It was the key for the eighth room. Well, he had no further need of it now. He was free. He was free. Free . .

(The End)

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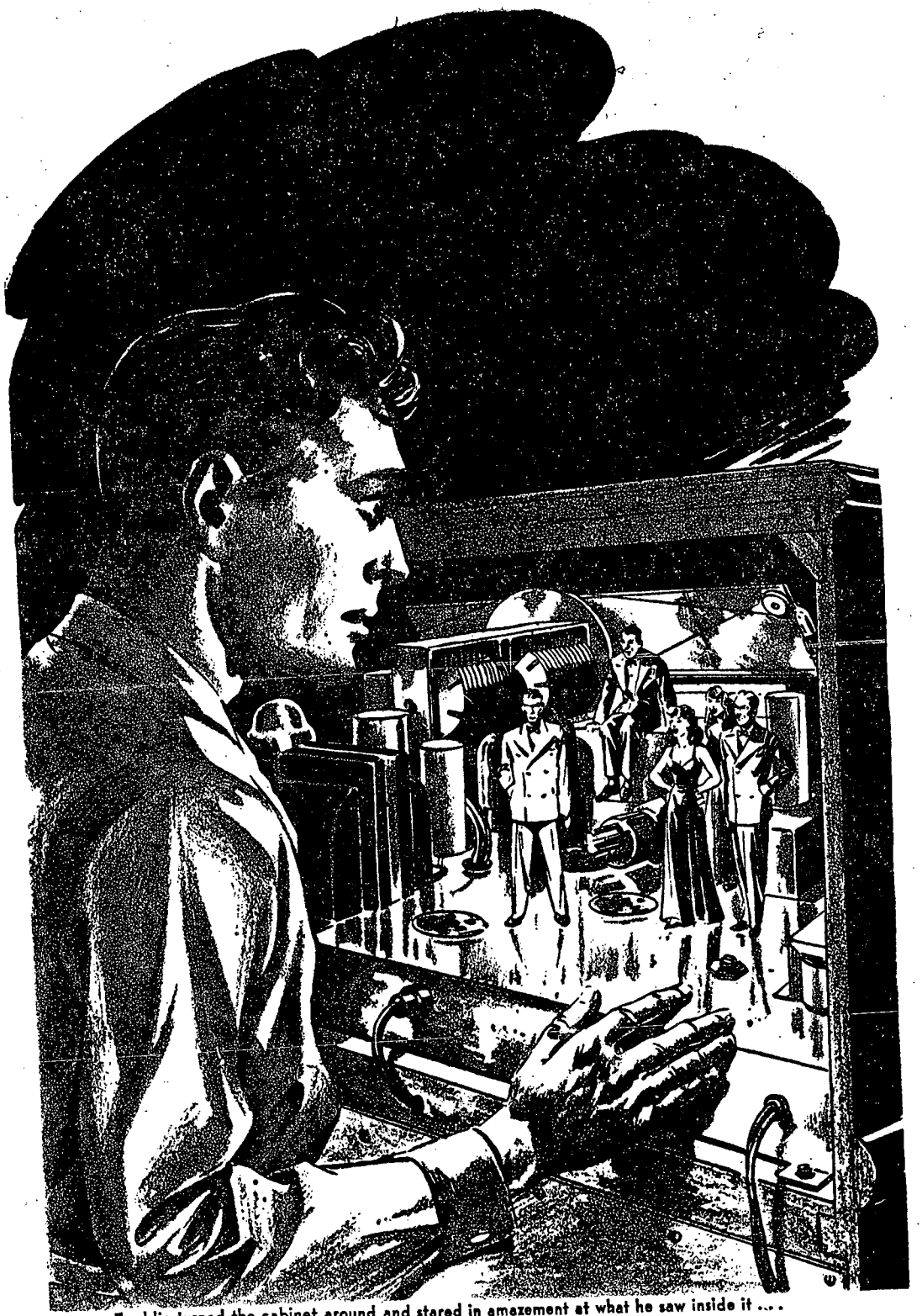

Freddie turned the cabinet around and stared in amazement at what he saw inside it . . . .

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Freddie Funk's Flippant Fairies

by Frances Yerxa

The music was nice, and so was the whole show. But Freddie Funk knew that his radio wasn't playing . . .

FREDDIE Funk felt very low. His wife, Aquanis, was visiting Uncle Putry Funk at Owl Corners, Michigan. Mr. Funk languished in a dilapidated chair by the radio. With his pipe roaring like a well-tended furnace and his feet hidden in warm slippers, Funk should have been very contented. He wasn't.

The radio spoiled everything. He had just escaped a soap opera and was listening to a pleading voice that begged him to buy a Comfy Fur Coat at almost half-price. This was not a situation that promoted relaxation.

With desperate hope for escape, he switched the dial to station WFL. To his surprise, the town's worst station burst forth with the sweetest music he had heard for months. He adjusted his pipe, settled back and puffed quietly.

The radio, an antiquated cabinet model, responded to the music. It seemed to possess a richer tone quality. The orchestra was one of the finest.

How could WFL afford to produce a show like this one?

The softer strains died away and a hit tune blared out. Funk closed his eyes and hummed dreamily, admiring the trio that added their voices to the music.

To think that only a week before he had planned to buy new tubes. Now he was glad he hadn't. The announcer's voice broke in.

"This is the Fair Frolic Hour presenting the dankest-drama and top-tunes and the finest fun in radio. Stand by for the fireworks."

Then came a spine-freezer mystery show followed by a series of fine programs.

At midnight he arose, mentally exhausted from an evening that had stacked surprise upon surprise. Not once had they mentioned a sponsor. This made Funk angry. He had a yearning to rush to the corner drug store and buy any product that WFL advertised. He felt cheated that he couldn't do so at once.

During Aquanis' absence Freddie was working with Walter Shank, an artist friend, doing a series of City Beautiful paintings for the Chamber of Commerce. Shank had a small downtown studio. He was a sour-faced, short-wave fan and an excellent artist.

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Funk entered Shank's office the following morning, ready to produce positive proof to Shank that WFL could produce a good program. Shank, angry because he had been forced to eat his wife's sweetrolls for breakfast, was ready to repulse any suggestion that the world was a pleasant place in which to live.

He listened to Funk's story until Freddie had finished his last glowing description of WFL's new deal. Then he scowled.

"You're batty," he said calmly. "I had WFL on at nine o'clock. They plugged cheap insurance until I got tired of listening."

Funk should have grown suspicious, but he didn't. He refused to argue with Shank, and returned to the apartment more firmly convinced than ever that Fair's Frolics was the best show he had ever heard. He planned to rush out and buy any product the show advertised.

No such opportunity presented itself. The evening went much as had the night before. A soloist, Judy Fair, started Freddie's heart pounding double time. He almost blushed when she sang her love songs.

The following morning he approached Shank with the conviction that he must have heard the program and would admit that it was wonderful. Shank was busy cleaning brushes when Funk entered. He looked up and at once became hostile.

"Look here, Funk," he protested. "I listened to WFL last night and all I heard was worn out recordings. They spent the night telling me about gardenias that glow in the dark and checker games to send to the boys who are still overseas."

Funk was prepared to argue, but something in Shank's voice set off a warning bell in his mind. He mumbled something about having made a mistake about the station. He carefully avoided mentioning WFL for the rest of the day.

He left an hour early and rushed to his apartment. Judy Fair's clear voice greeted him the moment he switched on the radio.

"I heard you cried last night," she sang wistfully. "And I know why."

Freddie felt somehow as though she was singing just for him. But the situation was growing serious. In spite of himself, Freddie had fallen in love with Judy Fair's voice. There was no other way. He must visit WFL and see Fair's Frolics for himself. He felt very cheap, acting this way when Aquanis was away. There just wasn't any other way out.

HE glanced at his watch. It was nine o'clock. If he hurried, he could reach WFL by ten. He dressed in his best suit, turned out the lights and crossed the room to switch the radio off.

Oddly enough, the cabinet was dark. The reflection of the tubes against the wall was not visible. Puzzled, he hesitated before the cabinet. The orchestra was hitting the Clyde McCoy arrangement of **Sugar Blues.** A strange, frightening sensation swept over Freddie Funk.

He snapped the radio off and the sound stopped abruptly. Yet, why had the tubes refused to light?

He pulled the cabinet away from the wall. A high pitched, feminine scream filled the room. He heard scratching, rattling sounds from within the radio, as though everything was rolling to the front.

Leaning over, he snapped on the table lamp and stared with open mouth at the interior of the set.

The tubes were all missing.

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Across the metal base, a piece of white cloth had been stretched. On the cloth were half a dozen small trumpets, a set of drums and a bass viol. None of them were over two inches in length. There were about three dozen little men and women trying to climb to their feet from the scramble he had made in tipping the radio set forward. They were all dressed spotlessly, the men in tuxedos, the women in formal evening gowns.

Carefully, Freddie pushed the radio away from the wall and straightened it once more. He kneeled down behind it, continuing to stare popeyed at the company of two inch people.

They were on their feet now, brushing themselves carefully. A couple of the men were swearing a blue-streak. A pompous, middle aged gentleman stepped from the crowd and made his way toward Freddie. He stopped a few inches from Freddie's nose.

"You certainly made a fine mess, didn't you?" he shouted.

The interior of the cabinet echoed and re-echoed until his voice was clear and loud.

Freddie didn't know what to say.

"I—I didn't exactly expect to find people—that is. . . ."

The pompous one nodded.

"Yes, we're people," he said. "You don't have to sound apologetic about it. We have to live just as you do, you know."

Freddie blinked. A lovely two inch lady had walked to the fat man's side and looped her arm in his. She had a pert, well shaped face and a body that was certainly the cutest collection of curves that Funk had ever gazed upon.

Her voice, when she spoke, tinkled like sleigh bells.

"Now, Daddy, control your temper. Mr. Funk is startled by us. You can't expect him to understand."

Freddie backed away a few inches and opened his mouth. Somehow words wouldn't come out.

The pompous little man seemed to reconsider. Then with a smile, he held out his hand.

"Shake, Mr. Funk. Guess I lost my temper. You had to meet the troop sooner or later anyhow. What do you think of us?"

Freddie looked suspiciously at the tiny hand, wondering how he could shake it without destroying it. He held out his thumb and forefinger and touched the little man's hand. He dropped it again and tried to think of a good answer.

"You—you weren't making all that music, were you?" he asked incredulously.

He knew the answer already. It was obvious that they had. The radio wouldn't play without tubes. The lovely, fairy-like little Judy Fair gave him his answer.

"We haven't any right to be here, really," she admitted. "You see, Dad's never suffered from an inferiority complex exactly. He decided that the troop should go on the air, and he chose you because you were just next door."

"Next door?" to what, Funk wondered.

"Yes," Judy continued eagerly. "We came from the undertaking parlor."

FREDDIE Funk shivered. Yes, he remembered the Greenlawn Mortuary next door.

"But—how? How did you get so small?"

Mr. Fair bristled.

"We can't help that," he protested.

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"If they insisted on trying to bury us, don't you think we were entitled to escape?"

Freddie groaned. By this time the remainder of the entertainers had climbed carefully to their feet and were busy brushing dust from each other. They came forward, gathering about Mr. Fair and Judy. They all looked a little frightened.

"I can't say I'm as shocked as I ought to be about this, but what's it all about?" Freddie asked. "I've faced some pretty queer situations, but never anything like this. You came from the undertaker. You've been making music in my radio because you've taken the tubes and it couldn't play without them. Why?"

Mr. Fair looked at his daughter. It was plain to see that he was discouraged with Freddie Funk's ability to understand plain English.

"You try to tell him, Judy."

Judy tripped daintily forward until her tiny mouth was even with Freddie's ear. Freddie blushed. To think he had fallen in love with Judy's voice to find a tiny girl only two inches tall. At least she was very, very pretty.

"We are small," she said slowly, "because we are all that's left of people who died and were taken next door. Almost everyone had just the teeniest bit of life left in them. I guess we were too intelligent to let ourselves be buried and forgotten. We talked it over one night."

"The night of the accident," her father piped up, "Don't forget to tell him everything, Judy."

Judy nodded.

"The night of the accident," she added. "It was a train accident. We were coming to New York, the orchestra, Dad and I. We planned to break into big-time. The train was wrecked and we were all brought to the mortuary. Dad knew quite a lot about medicine. He suggested that the living part of us escape from our bodies before all of us were dead. We did it, but it was hard for us to get along for a while."

Funk's brain was whirling around entirely out of control.

"I think it would be hard," he admitted.

"Yes," Mr. Fair broke in again." We had to manufacture instruments to fit what was left of us. It took months. Then we decided if we were to eat, we'd have to get back into radio."

"You did just that," Freddie admitted. "I've been wondering why I could get a radio program that no one else ever heard."

Mr. Fair chuckled.

"We're good, aren't we?"

"Oh, yes," Freddie admitted. "But why did you come here?"

"That was easy," Judy said. "We took several hours to make the trip. We planned to go from house to house, get into someone's radio and convince them that we were really good. When we did that, we hoped they would help us get on the air."

So that was it? Freddie Funk's heart sank. To begin with he didn't know anyone who worked for a radio station. In the second place, how could he present these tiny people to the public? He could hardly believe them himself. What would others say when he told them about Mr. Fair and the Fair Frolics.

"I—I'm not so sure I can help you," he admitted. "It's pretty hard to put a new show across. I've never tried anything like that."

Judy Fair leaned close to his ear.

"But you will try, won't you? Just for us?"

He felt her lips brush his ear and

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his face grew crimson all over again.

"I'll try," he promised.

A round of applause greeted his words. Someone pounded on the drum and a hot trumpet took off. The jam session was on. Mr. Fair's orchestra started a jam session that lasted far into the night and sent Freddie Funk to the studio the following morning with a headache and a very tough problem.

He'd have to solve it somehow. The little people were depending on him.

JASON Forbes, owner of station WFL, was a big man with a thick lower lip that rolled out stubbornly when he talked. He regarded Freddie Funk from under half closed lids.

"But we can't pay for new talent," he protested. "We're satisfied now. Sorry, but it's no go."

Freddie was clinging desperately to his last ditch. If he failed here, after waiting three hours for an interview, he might as well give up.

"Look," he begged. "I'm giving you a free offer. Try my show for a week. If at that time they aren't suitable, you don't have to pay a dime."

Forbes smiled sadly.

"And if they are good, I still can't pay a dime. I can't spend another cent this year." He shook his head. "No, I'm sorry, Mr. Funk. If the show can be had for nothing, it can't be very good. If it costs money, I can't pay it. We're both licked, Funk. Why not admit it?"

Freddie left WFL with a heavy heart.

The long walk to the apartment brought numerous ideas to mind. He couldn't just walk in and tell the gang that it was all off. Freddie had an idea. WFL went off the air at midnight. Perhaps. . . .?

Very excited now, he stopped in at the Five-to-a-Dollar store and purchased a small suitcase. On the way out, he paid a quarter for a small pillow, placed it in the suitcase and hurried home. He opened the door to find Judy Fair sitting cross-legged on top of one of his slippers. Mr. Fair was walking up and down the evening paper, reading the headlines. The remainder of the troop were scattered about the room. Freddie hesitated at the door.

"You'd better get back in the radio," he warned. "I'd hate to step on anyone."

Fair looked up angrily from his paper.

"You do and I'll push a pin in your pants," he threatened. Nevertheless, he scurried toward the radio with the rest of them. Judy stayed where she was, atop Freddie's slipper.

"How did you come out at the station?" she asked eagerly.

Freddie tried to smile.

"It's all fixed," he said. "You go on at eleven-thirty tonight."

A cheer arose from inside the radio. Judy did a little dance, fell to the floor and spent a blushing few seconds getting her skirts drawn back down over her knees. Mr. Fair lifted his baton and they serenaded Freddie with Happy Days Are Here Again.

"I don't like this business of being packed like a shirt or a pair of trousers," Fair grumbled. He stepped over the edge of the open suitcase and dropped on the pillow at the bottom.

Freddie watched as the remainder of the troop followed.

"I cut a row of holes around the top," he assured Fair. "You'll have plenty of air to breathe. I have to get you downtown some way."

Judy was last. He picked her up tenderly between his fingers and lowered her beside her father. She blew

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him a kiss as he closed the lid. The instruments were all in. Freddie looked at his watch. It was just ten o'clock. The last half hour show at WFL was a combination recorded music and news-cast affair. There would be only one man in the studio, and Freddie remembered that the control room was far away, down the hall. The studio was a tiny, glassed-in affair and the glass was frosted so no one could see from outside.

He traveled the twenty blocks to WFL, went into the lobby as though he belonged there and placed the suitcase down carefully just outside the studio. Pushing the door open, he stepped inside. A paunchy, hairless individual was sitting at the table, one hand on the revolving table that held the recordings, the other around the base of the table mike.

He turned as Freddie came in.

"You'll have to get out," he said with a scowl." We go on the air in two minutes."

Mr. Funk continued to advance. He picked up a package of discs that were lying on the desk.

The man at the mike started to rise.

"I said get the hell out of here."

C R A S H

Freddie swung the discs cooly, and they smashed into a thousand pieces on the bald man's head. The announcer staggered for a moment and sank to the floor. He didn't try to stand up again. He was cross-eyed and out cold.

Freddie ran to the hall, picked up the suitcase and rushed back to the studio. He turned the key in the lock. Opening the suitcase, he shouted to Mr. Fair.

"Only a minute to go. Hurry."

When the red light over the clock flashed on, Mr. Fair and his Frolics were arranged on top of the desk, and Freddie Funk stood by, holding the mike close to Fair's mouth.

"This is the premier performance of Fair's Frolics," Mr. Fair announced. "WFL presents a half hour of the finest. . . ."

The orchestra and Judy Fair took over then. The announcer on the floor was fortunately, not visible from the table top. Fair's Frolics gave out with their very best music.

A half hour later, a very worried Mr. Funk placed them back in the suitcase, unlocked the door and stepped into the hall to face several studio employees, including red-faced Mr. Forbes.

Forbes wore a heavy coat over his pajamas. He still wore his bedroom slippers. He was very excited.

"Look here, Funk," he shouted. "How the hell did you get in that studio?"

Freddie was prepared for the worst.

"You liked the show, didn't you?" he asked. "I had to prove to you that it was good."

Forbes pushed him aside and rushed into the studio. He stared about with amazement, then he turned to Funk.

"Sure I liked them. I loved them. Where the hell are they?"

Freddie hadn't thought of that. Of course Forbes would want to meet Judy Fair and her gang.

He pointed at the suitcase which he had placed on the floor. To his surprise, Forbes started to chuckle.

"Of course," he said. "You couldn't get a whole cast in that two by four s t u d i o. Recordings, huh, Funk? Damned clever idea. You say these people are all under contract to you?"

Freddie sighed. Forbes thought he had made recordings of the Frolics. That he was carrying the discs in that

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suitcase.

"All mine," he admitted.

Forbes remembered suddenly that no matter how well he liked Funk's show, he still didn't have money to pay for it.

"Give me a break, Funk," he pleaded. "I can't pay a dime out of my own pocket. Let me have the show for a week. We'll feature it at eight o'clock for a full hour. Just as soon as it gets a sponsor, I'll pay plenty."

Freddie tried to look doubtful, but inside his heart was singing gaily.

"For a week," he promised. "After that, if you can't produce cash, we'll try someone else."

Half way home, he remembered that he was supposed to call Aquanis and make arrangements to meet her Saturday night. He hurried into Union Station. There were a row of telephone booths near the door.

He put the bag down carefully and bought a slug. In five minutes, he had talked with Aquanis, promised to meet her at Union Station on Saturday night, and hung up. He picked up the bag hurriedly and raced for home. He'd have to get Judy and the gang out of the suitcase soon, or they'd all suffocate.

He locked the door quickly, put the suitcase on top of the radio and opened it. A pair of trousers and a patent leather shoe bounced out, hitting him in the stomach. His face turned white.

It wasn't his suitcase.

This one was filled to the rim with male clothing. Someone at the station had left his bag behind and carried away the entire cast of Fair's Frolics.

The next half hour was a frantic chase for Freddie Funk. He rushed back to Union Station with the stranger's baggage, hoping by some wild chance to find the man who was carrying Fair's Frolics. He realized that the search was useless. The station was crowded with service men and travelers, all hurrying to meet their trains. Returning to the phone booth he had used to call his wife, Funk searched carefully for another bag like the one he carried.

Half an hour passed and he was sick with worry. He returned to the apartment, still carrying a bag that did not belong to him. This was Friday night. Tomorrow he must meet Aquanis and admit to Jason Forbes that he was unable to produce the Frolics in person. Meanwhile, Judy Fair, her father and their friends were somewhere on a train speeding toward an unknown destination, and probably half dead from lack of air. He thought of what might happen when the stranger opened the suitcase and viewed its inmates. Freddie shuddered and tried to sleep.

Saturday morning came. The alarm was ringing and the clock itself seemed to jump up and down angrily on the dresser. Funk turned over with a moan and scrambled out of bed. He reached the alarm clock just as it stopped ringing and staggered into the bathroom. He was whistling a doleful tune when the telephone rang. Funk threw his robe about wet shoulders and answered.

"Is this Mr. Funk?"

"Yes—who's calling?"

Freddie hoped it was the stranger who had his suitcase. No such luck.

"Mr. Funk, this is Forbes—Jason Forbes of WFL. We've run into a real bit of luck."

"Fine," Freddie agreed without enthusiasm.

"Yes, it is fine," Forbes continued. "The Snifty Soap Flakes people heard your frolics last night. They like 'em,"

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his voice rose with excitement. "In fact they love 'em. We're putting on an audition Sunday night. If your gang delivers the goods, Snifty Soap Flakes will sign a contract."

Freddie's knees felt srtangely small to hold his weight.

"That's—that's nice," he said weakly. "I think we can make it."

"You **think?**" Forbes' voice rose to a roar. "Good lord, man, Snifty is the biggest account in town. They've held down big net-work spots for a dozen years. This will put you and WFL on the map. I've arranged for the use of a big auditorium next door. Remember, Funk, report with your people at seven. We'll go through the whole thing and be ready to give Snifty Soap Flakes the works at eight, Sunday night."

"We'll—be there," Freddie promised.

He wondered after he had hung up why he had said that.

Aquanis was coming through number three gate, pushed forward by dozens of inconsiderate people who didn't realize that she was a lovely girl, an ex-mermaid, and Freddie Funk's wife. Aquanis had grown more beautiful during her short married life. Her leaving Freddie had been for political reasons. Uncle Putry Funk at Owl Corners, Michigan was a very rich man and he might die some day. Freddie thought it might be well to remind Uncle Putry that he, Freddie, was still alive and in need of money. Aquanis had carried the Message to Garcia, and Uncle Putry had been greatly impressed.

Freddie, still badly worried about the Frolics, saw Aquanis at the same time she spotted his curly head above the throng. They met with an embrac so fervent, that several people turned and admired Funk's technique.

"Gosh," Freddie admitted. "I don't start missing you 'til you get back. Then I realize how lonely I was."

Aquanis blushed prettily, pushed her baggage into his hands and followed him through the station. Outside they hailed a cab and spent the ten minutes making up for lost love.

When Freddie produced his apartment key and started to open the door he noticed a card in the mail-box. He opened the box, drew out the card and slipped it into his pocket.

Removing his coat, he tossed it on the divan and hurried into the kitchen. Shortly the odor of bacon and eggs emerged into the living room where Aquanis was busy reading the card she removed from Freddie's pocket.

Funk looked up from the hot skillet to find his wife staring at him with red, accusing eyes. She held the card in her hand. Funk dropped the spatula and ran to her.

"Honey, you're crying. Did the trip make you sick?"

She wiped the tears away with her sleeve and turned away from him.

"The trip didn't," she admitted frigidly, "but you do."

Funk backed away slowly.

"I—don't understand."

Aquanis jerked it away. She started Her fists were clenched.

"Who is Judy Fair?"

Freddie's heart jumped. He reached for the card.

"Is that from Judy? Good lord, let me have it."

Aquanis jerked it away. She started to read aloud.

"Dear Freddie:

We are stranded in a hick station, Corner Crossing, a hundred miles north of Chicago. Someone left the suitcase here and hasn't picked it up. I made a getaway with Dad's help and found this card lying on

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the station master's desk. It's midnight as I write this message. I hope he'll notice it in the morning and mail it for me. Gee, this is some pen. For Heaven's sake hurry up here and get me.

Love
Judy Fair

When she had finished, Aquanis scowled.

"That," she announced, "is what I get for going away for a week. You'd better hurry, dear, Judy's lonely and is waiting for you at Corner Crossing."

Funk was licked. If he tried to explain that Judy was just two inches tall; that Judy had to crawl through a hole in the suitcase and handle a pen several times her size to write the card, Aquanis might believe him. He doubted it.

"Please," he begged. "I haven't done anything wrong. Will you give me until Sunday night to prove it?"

Aquanis shrugged.

"I haven't any choice, have I? A lot depends on what you call wrong. Now if you answered Judy's card. .?"

"That's just what I'll have to do," Freddie admitted miserably. "I'll have to leave for Corner Crossing right away."

"That's what I mean," Aquanis admitted. "Go ahead and have a nice time. Don't ever let it be said that your wife held you down."

"But Aquanis."

She turned her back to him and ran to the bedroom. When he left for Corner Crossings, Aquanis had locked her door and wouldn't let him in.

The trip home was a short one, and Freddie rushed up the stairs with the Fair Frolics safely under his arm. He hadn't been able to get a train out of Corner Crossings until late Sunday afternoon. Now he could explain everything to Aquanis. She would see for herself that Judy was completely harmless. She could understand something that had been impossible to explain.

Freddie placed the suitcase carefully on the floor, unlocked the door and entered the living room.

"Aquanis," he called.

He tossed his hat on the chair, lifted the suitcase and opened it on the table.

Mr. Fair mopped his brow and shook his head uncertainly.

"That," he announced, "was a harrowing experience. Thank you, Mr. Funk, for the very timely rescue."

Funk accepted the thanks, noticing that Judy was sound asleep in one corner. The remainder of the troop looked as though they needed a bath and some rest.

He was worried about his wife now. He made a round of the apartment, but she was missing. Probably at the store.

No! On top of the tubeless radio he found a short note.

Freddie:

I'm sorry, but after thinking it over, I don't think I can face your Judy. How could you be so callous and leave me go to her? I can't forgive you for that.

Aquanis

"But it's all off," Jason Forbes was shouting at the top of his voice. "I can't help what trouble you've been through. The fire broke out this morning. Every studio was destroyed. It will take us six months and a lot of money I don't have to re-build. The Snifty Soap show is dead. In fact, I might as well be dead. We haven't a dime left."

Freddie held the receiver grimly, trying to think for some way out.

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Forbes had been talking for ten minutes. Station WFL had burned to the ground. Nothing remained.

"How about Snifty?" Freddie pleaded. "Couldn't we get their approval and rebuild the studio with the money they pay us?"

He could tell from Forbes' voice that WFL's owner had stopped trying to fight.

"I'm sorry," Forbes admitted at last. "I'm licked. I've been struggling for years, just making both ends meet. I don't have a dime's worth of insurance. I haven't even got a mike left, let alone. . . ."

"Wait a minute," Funk's brain was coming through with an idea. "How about that auditorium you were going to hire? Can you still get it?"

"You're nuts," Forbes cried. "I just finished telling you. . . ."

"I know—I know. You tell the Snifty Soap people to invite their whole staff to the audition tonight at eight. Pack that auditorium to the roof. I'll call you back in ten minutes."

"But—no show—no station," Jason Forbes cried weakly.

"I'll give you the show," Freddie howled. "Do as I say."

He hung up.

Walter Shank, the artist Funk worked with, had a short-wave station. Freddie knew very little about short-wave, but he did know that it could be picked up by radio as easily as a regular station. He phoned Shank and spent the next five minutes pleading with him. When he called Jason Forbes again, Forbes listened at first with growing interest and finally seemed vastly pleased with Funk's plan.

"You have a good radio there," Freddie ordered. "And a few loudspeakers to increase the volume. Don't forget, pack that auditorium."

"I'll pack it," Forbes agreed fervently, "if I have to drag people off the streets."

Five minutes to eight.

Freddie Funk rushed up the narrow attic stairs behind Walter Shank. Shank pushed up an attic door and led the way into a dusty, low-ceilinged room. He turned on a single bulb over the crude panel of the short-wave set and sat down before it. With the headphone over his ears, he motioned Funk to a table mike half way across the attic.

"You'll have to get them all around that mike," he said. "You won't have much room."

Freddie grinned knowingly. Shank hadn't seen the Fair Frolics yet. He thought they hadn't arrived.

"Plenty of room," Freddie said.

While Shank worked over the set, testing the mike and adjusting the controls, Freddie opened the suitcase.

"Okay," he said. "Only three minutes to go. Get set up."

He was aware that Shank had turned in surprise and was staring at the battered suitcase. Mr. Fair climbed out with Funk's help, and Shank's eyes opened very wide.

"What the hell?"

"Shut up," Funk ordered. "You promised not to say a word regardless of what happened. Get that radio ready to work."

Shank went back to the panel, his head half turned, watching with wide eyes as Judy climbed out, kissed Freddie Funk on the chin and moved away so the others might follow. Shank was speechless now, as he watched the suitcase. Freddie closed the cover and helped arrange the orchestra before the mike. Shank was watching the clock.

"One minute," he said in an uncertain voice. "Funk, I don't under-

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stand."

"You don't have to," Funk snapped. "I promised you a new outfit if this goes over. Now keep quiet."

Shank thought of the new transmitter he had been dreaming about and lapsed into silence. It seemed as though an hour passed before he said:

"Ten seconds."

Freddie leaned over the mike.

"Go ahead," Shank said softly. "You're on."

Freddie took a deep breath.

"This is the Snifty Soap Flakes's show," he announced. "Tonight we are using the facilities of Short Wave Station KFFL, because the studios of WFL have been damaged by fire. Snifty Soap Flakes present a brand new show the Fair Frolics. Without wasting further time with commercials, I present, Mr. Fair."

Exactly fifty-five minutes later, Walter Shank's wife pushed the attic door up and motioned Freddie toward her. He was listening to Judy give out with the Saint Louis Blues. Freddie crossed the attic silently and listened while Mrs. Shank whispered in his ear.

"Mr. Forbes called a moment ago," she said. "The President of the Snifty Soap Flakes Company is wild about the show. He says just keep going. They may listen all night. They can't seem to get enough of it."

Two hours later, Mr. Fair wiped the perspiration from his brow and approached the mike.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he announced. "This is the longest show on radio. Two hours of entertainment that have been as Nifty as Snifty. Snifty isn't ordinary soap and this isn't an ordinary program. Use Snifty. It's as gentle as Judy Fair's voice, and as fine as our rhythm. We aren't modest. Why should we be? We're a fine show, selling a finer product. Fair's Frolics bids you good-night until next Monday at the same time—I hope."

Almost before Freddie Funk could make his way down stairs, the telephone was ringing again. It was Mr. Warren Garr who said in a dignified voice that he was president of the Snifty Soap Flakes Company.

"I've been talking with Mr. Forbes." Garr announced. "He tells me you are on the staff of WFL. Is that correct?"

Freddie swallowed.

"I—guess it is."

"Fine," Warren Garr boomed. "WFL isn't worth the powder it would take to. . ."

"I know," Freddie interrupted hurriedly. "We—will have to rebuild."

"I'm going to rebuild it," Garr assured him. "On the condition that you take a position as production director and sign a contract with Fair for five years."

"Thanks," Freddie said. "I think Mr. Fair will sign, if you'll promise that all shows originate from a locked studio."

Mr. Garr swore.

"They can originate from the South Pole for all I care," he admitted. "Just as long as the show remains as good as it was tonight."

A slight pause followed, then Mr. Garr's voice came again, lower and slightly confidential.

"I wonder," he asked, "if you could introduce me to that soloist, Judy Fair?"

Freddie grinned.

"I'm afraid I couldn't," he lied. "Anyhow, she's got buck teeth and weighs two hundred pounds."

Mr. Garr sighed.

"That's the trouble with these ra-

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dio people," he admitted. "They're always as homely as a stub fence and built like overgrown cows."

"Almost always," Freddie agreed. "And now I guess I better stop talking. You see, I haven't seen my wife for quite a while. I've been planning to talk over something with her."

He heard Mr. Garr mumble something, then Aquanis' voice came from directly behind him.

"You won't have to talk anything over with me." she said.

Freddie forgot the telephone and whirled around. Aquanis was standing at the door, with Walter Shank and his wife smiling happily at her. Mr. Fair and his troop were gathered about Aquanis' feet and Judy Fair was perched daintily on Aquanis' shoulder.

Aquanis walked toward him quick and threw her arms about his neck.

"Next time, will you explain things to me?" she begged. "How did I know that Judy Fair was one of the tiny people?"

"And next time," Judy's tiny shriek came to them, "let me know when you two are going into a clinch. If you don't separate, I'm going to suffocate."

Freddie jumped back quickly. Judy had slipped from Aquanis' shoulder and was clinging desperately to her dress at the neckline.

"One more crack out of you," he said good naturedly, "and back to the suitcase you go."

Judy stared up at them from where Freddie placed her on the carpet.

"Simon Legree Funk," she shouted and stuck her tongue out at him. "It would serve you right if I took a bath in your coffee."

(The End)

THE LAVENDER VINE OF DEATH

(Continued from Page 77)

"Thank you, Arvo." Her eyes were shining.

He paced in front of the table, then turned to her. The longer speech he had wanted to make suddenly melted to a few blunt words. "You've played an important part in the destiny of Karridonza, my dear. I'll never forget it."

"And you, Arvo—your majesty—" she was smiling and her words were tumbling hurriedly, "I'm so glad I've stayed long enough to see you win everything you want. You've proved that you deserve it. You've changed —"

"Yes, thanks to the lavender vine, and Nadoff, and Joe—and **you.** But have I won everything I want?"

"Haven't you?"

He came to her and took her hand.

"You don't have to leave, do you, Marcia? There's no law against your staying. If there is, I'll change it. You might like us well enough to—to marry and settle down."

Marcia was shaking her head. "Thank you, Arvo. But I want to go."

"Soon?"

"There's a space ship leaving at midnight."

King Arvo gave her a little wink "I thought that would be it. All right. I'd better send an escort with you. It's an old Karridonzan custom."

"A slave?"

"An ex-slave. There are no slaves in Karridonza, you know." Arvo moved toward the marble columns and called. "Joe."

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Joe strolled into the room, trying to appear casual. Marcia looked at him as if to shame him. "Oh, an eavesdropper!"

"I always keep a double around in case of an emergency," King Arvo said. "Joe Peterson, are you willing to accompany Miss Melinda as far as the skystation?"

Joe laughed. "Stop this farce, you two. Marcia, you're hooked. I've already bargained with the king to marry us here and now, so I can be your escort all the way to the earth."

Marcia swallowed her smile and tried hard to look offended. "You two have taken advantage of me. Don't I have anything to say about this?"

"You're doomed," Joe said, drawing her into his arms. "Any last request?"

Her stern look gave way to a happy glow. "One last request, Joe. Ask his majesty to tie the knot with a bit of lavender vine, so it will bring us back again some day."

EGYPTIAN DEITIES

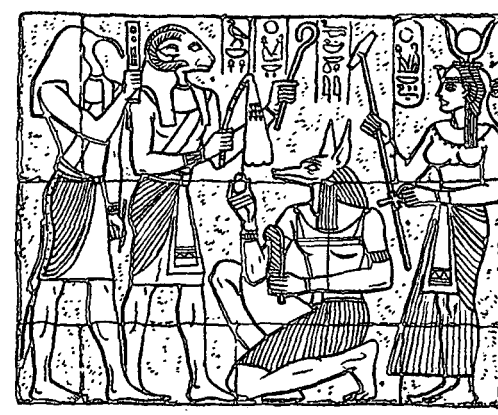
☆ By L. A. Burt ☆

IN THE very sound of their names, Osiris, Thoth, Baal, Ra and a host of others, the names of the gods of ancient Egypt carry down to us a spirit of romanticism. Oddly enough they are, however, not nearly as familiar as their later counterparts, the gods of ancient Greece and Rome who permeate our very conversation. Nevertheless their own origin is even simpler to understand.

Egypt and the Valley of the Nile are among the most fertile spots on Earth and as we know a tremendously rich agricultural economy developed there. In fact the general region of the Middle East and North Africa is regarded as the birthplace of man because of this extraordinary fertility. In light of the fact that the land was so rich, that animals were all about and that there was little rainfall—only sunshine—it is not surprising that the ancient Egyptians revered deities most of which resembled animals or at least were so given to the people with animal-like visages.

Practically all of the Egyptian gods are the result of a modified form of animal worship. Not only animals, but all natural phenomena about them were regarded by the Egyptians as suitable for adoration. The sun, the moon, and the stars, as to all primitive peoples, provided abundant sources of subjects for worship.

According to Egyptian legend in the beginning only the ocean existed. All else was nothingness. But from the bosom of the ocean arose a flower —which was to be the sun-god Ra (or *Re*). In later Egyptian mythology this god is called Atun, Atum, Aton or Atom; it is interesting to speculate upon the connection between the Greek word "atom" and the title of the later Egyptian



sun-god.

In any event, Ra spawned four children, Shu, Tefnut, Keb, and Nut. These four children and Ra lay for a long time on the primeval ocean, never stirring. Then Shu and Tefnut stuck themselves between Keb and Nut and thus became the atmosphere, the Egyptian gods of the air. Resting on Keb, they raised Nut into the heavens. Keb then became the earth and the sky was Nut. So was the world born.

Keb and Nut, Earth and sky, fathered four other divinities, Osiris, Isis, Set and Nephthys; these four entities, together with the preceeding five formed a circle of nine gods which became the core of the ancient Egyptian religion. They appear in one form or another in practically all the Egyptian temples that were ever built. And throughout the entire Egyptian mythology their names are encountered.

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There were additional gods, gods of the underworld, of the nether-domains, wherein dwelt the dead. These form perhaps the most enchanting and interesting of all the Egyptian deities. Ra, the sun-god, gave up his position as king or ruler of the Earth in favor of Osiris—who with his wife Isis, ruled men well and wisely. But his brother Set, by trickery, slew him. His wife, Isis, had a difficult time in getting hold of his body in order to prepare it properly for the burial ceremony. Fortunately she was assisted by another underworld god, a jackel, Anubis, who later became the god of embalmment. Isis' grief was so terrible over the death of her lord, and the spells and enchantments provided by herself and Anubis were so powerful, that Osiris was revived, but because he could no longer occupy his original body, he was forced to take over the kingship of the underworld, to look after the dead and to see that the departed souls were happy.

But Isis was not yet through. She gave birth to a son, Horus, who, upon acquiring god-adulthood, pursued Set and in a fearful and tremendous battle vanquished him, in the process of which both lesser-gods were terribly mutilated. Horus then assumed the kinship of the earth which Set had taken from his father. But Set charged Horus, before a tribunal of gods, with illegitimacy. On this basis he desired to have Horus removed from the kingship of the Earth. Isis called upon another god, whose name is familiar in our ears, Thoth. Thoth was the god of letters, of literary things, the lawyer-god, and by his eloquent arguing he succeeded in establishing Horus' right to the throne of Earth.

This story of Egyptian mythology is merely elemental, but it offers many interesting by-ways. In particular, the Egyptians were completely interested and thoroughly occupied with the problems that would ensue after death. Consequently, their whole mythology is interlarded with concern for the dead evidenced by the frequent references in the records left to us, to the "underworld." Their immense preoccupation with the art of the embalmer is also excellent evidence of this interest. The quality of their work—the highest—is shown by the well-preserved mummies in our museums today.

* * *

FIRE FROM HEAVEN

★ By Carter T. Wainwright ★

PIOTR KOTRAVICH stirred uneasily in his sleep. In the darkness he could hear the heavy breathing of Anna, his wife. He thought to himself as if to drown his waking moments by an overdose of thought. Piotr was not a thinking man. Eighteen hours a day of hard laborious work on his little two hundred hectare plot of cold Siberian ground was not conducive to thinking. Yet because Piotr could not sleep, he thought of the things that he wanted for himself and Anna. There was so much to get. Outside of his rude log hut, his few livestock—he had nothing. When the Czar's Cossacks sent him to Siberia in a contingent of work people for that area, he could not refuse to go. It was a miracle that Anna had been able to go with him. And so thinking, Piotr started to drift off into heavy sleep.

Suddenly the world exploded! The sky became filled with fire and there was a terrible thundering noise. Both Piotr and Anna jerked to wakefulness. Both threw their coats about them and dashed outside. The sky was lit up for many miles around them and a terrible forest fire seemed to be raging. Soon they saw soldiers and peasants headed in the direction of the fire. With the faint hope that there might be something salvagable, Piotr and Anna went in the same direction. Often the sky blazed brighter and they crossed them-

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selves. This was no ordinary forest fire. The frequent loud and rumbling explosions denied that. Soon they realized that it was futile to go farther and so they returned to their cabin as did most of the others. The air was full of speculative conversation, but old Alexiev Costanich, the settlement's wise man—he had been to Petrograd once—told them that it was simply a meteor that had fallen—a meteorite.

"It must have been huge," he said, speaking with the slow sonorous tones of one who is accustomed to be listened to, for even in Petrograd they said most meteors do not make any fires. These balls of molten rock and iron fall often in Siberia. In all the world no bigger ones have fallen." There was a wisp of a note of pride in his voice. Anna and Piotr returned to their cabin with the rest of the townspeople.

Early in the morning, according to testimony given by Anna later Piotr got up without awaking Anna, dressed warmly, as warmly as his meager wardrobe allowed and went back again toward the site of the fallen meteor . . .

The next morning a pair of woodcutters found the body of Piotr Alexander Kotravich lying in the snow where it had fallen, some thirty kilometers away from the site of the fallen meteorite. Piotr had not been frozen to death; no human being had murdered Piotr—who would want to. Nothing had been taken from him—nothing but his clothing. But not by hands. Piotr was a burnt corpse. Not too badly, you understand—but enough to kill him. Every vestige of clothing on him had been burned neatly away as if some one had played a huge gas torch over him—or a ray of intense sunlight would be more like it.

The case was brought to the attention of the medical authorities in the not too distant city of Koressa. The body was brought there and given a careful autopsy. The verdict was simple. Piotr Kotravich had met death by burning by something or someone unknown. The matter was clased, but not in Piotr's town.

Alexiev Constanich, the old wise man had other theories to account for Piotr's death. "Meteors are huge ships," he said, "like the ships that sail the ocean, but they come from other worlds greatly distant." The inhabitants of these ships killed Piotr, was his thesis. Anna and a number of the other peasants subscribed to this idea readily without understanding it. Perhaps they were wiser than they knew. Even today the legend filters among the ignorant Russian peasantry that meteorites are space ships.

With all our present-day scientific knowledge, can we deny its reasonability? More than one educated person has speculated about this and it is not an impossible idea. The unexplained death of Piotr Alexander Kotravich gives one to think.

☼ ☼ ☼

THE GHOST OF LORD TYRONE

☆ By H. R. Stanton ☆

IN THE seventeenth century in Ireland there lived in Gill Hall, Sir Tristam Beresford and his beautiful wife, Nicola, Lady Beresford.

One morning Lady Beresford was late in joining her husband and sister, Lady MacGill, for breakfast. They thought she was ill for when she did come down, she was pale and a strange expression marred her usually placid, beautiful face. But the most puzzling fact was that she wore a black bandage around her left wrist. They asked her if she had sprained her wrist or had fallen. But she leaned back in her chair and told them that they must never ask her why she wore the black bandage on her wrist, but that they would never see her without it. Her husband hesitated, but thought that with his wife in a strange mood, he should humor her, so promised her he would never question her again about her bandaged wrist.

Lady Beresford could hardly eat her breakfast. She inquired if the mail had arrived. When they asked her if she was expecting any special mail, she told them that they would receive a letter telling of Lord Tyron's death. Her husband was amazed at this statement and told her that Lord Tyrone was very much alive and in perfect health. But Nicola's voice was firm and sad when she insisted that he had died the previous Tuesday at four o'clock. A few minutes later the post did arrive, and there was the letter from Lord Tyrone's steward sealed with black wax. It stated simply that his master had died on Tuesday at four in the afternoon. They asked her how she could have known of his death since the mail was delivered only once a week. But she did not reply to this question. But she did turn to her husband and tell him that she also knew that she was with child and that it would be a boy. Lord Beresford was pleased and eager to believe this last prophecy, even though he already had two lovely daughters.

Lady Beresford retired to her room and her bewildered husband went away for the rest of the day on business. Late in the afternoon, Nicola came down stairs to have tea with her sister. Lady MacGill had made up her mind to be cheerful and not to mention the events of the morning, but Nicola was still in a strange mood and finally asked her sister to hear her strange story. But first she made her sister promise that she would tell no one as long as she lived. So she told her sister that she and Lord Tyrone had been very dear friends when they were young and

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that they had often talked of religion. Nicola had expressed the wish and hope that their revealed religion was the true one and that they would all go on living somewhere, somehow after death. So they made a compact by promising that whichever one died first was to return if at all possible, and give some unmistakable sign. Soon after this solemn promise, Lord Tyrone went away to school and Nicola never saw him in life again. She married Sir Tristram Beresford, and fifteen years had past since her compact with Tyrone. About midnight, Nicola was awakened to find Lord Tyrone standing beside her bed. Her husband was asleep at her side. She was frightened and tried in vain to awaken Sir Tristram. She asked Tyrone why he was there and he reminded her of the promise they had made each other fifteen years before. He told her he had died Tuesday at four o'clock, and that he had been allowed time to come to her to assure her that their religion was the true one and the only one by which they could be saved. He also told her that she was to have a son in the near future who was destined to marry his heiress. He also told Nicola that Sir Tristram would live only a few more years, and that she would mary the second time and be very unhappy, and that she would die of childbirth in her forty-seventh year. Nicola was terribly upset, and fearing that she was having a bad dream, asked Tyrone to give a convincing sign so that in the morning she could know if it was her imagination. So he entwined the bed curtains through the iron rings in a complicated manner, and went to her purse and wrote his name on a card and placed it in her purse. When Nicola told him she was still unsatisfied, that she needed something still more convincing to remove all doubts that he had been there, he hesitated a moment as though in doubt, and then laid his marble, cold hand on her wrist. The instant he did this, the sinews shrunk and the nerves withered to his icy touch. He had given her indisputable proof, but told her that she must let no one see her wrist as long as she lived. Then he disappeared.

Lady MacGill was filled with a wonderment, but remembered her promise to keep the strange events of the previous night a life-long secret.

WITHIN the year a son was born, and in six years, Sir Tristram died. In order to avoid the prediction of her second unhappy marriage, Lady Beresford retired from society, but in spite of her seclusion, she met a man whom she could not get out of her mind. She tried not to fall in love with him, but in time she could not help herself and became his wife. As predicted, he was very cruel to her. She left him many times, but something always forced her back to him. She had had one son by her second husband, and was determined to stay away from him to avoid death in her forty-seventh year due to childbirth. So she did not return to him until after what she believed was her forty-seventh birthday, to avoid facing her final prediction. She had just had her second son by her second husband, and she wanted to have a few friends and her family in to celebrate her forty-eighth birthday. Among her guests was an old doctor and clergyman who had christened her. He told her that she was only forty-seven that day instead of forty-eight, because there had been a mistake in the registry. He had brought the old records along to prove it.

Lady Beresford was distressed with this information, but decided that she could not change destiny, so she called her children to her and told them the strange story of the predictions that the ghost of Lord Tyrone had made to her many years before. She said that she had just learned of her mistaken age and knew she was about to die. She told them that as soon as she died they could remove the bandage from her wrist.

They left her alone long enough to summon a doctor, and when they returned to her room, she was dead. They unbound her wrist and found it shrunken as if it had been dead for years. The touch of death!

* * *

THE CARDELLI MONSTER

☆ By Sandy Miller ☆

THE city of Turin, in northern Italy, is a huge, sprawling metropolitan manufacturing center today. During the first and second World Wars it provided the sinews for the Italian war machine and the products of its factories are known all over the world—Fiat and Alfeo Roma automobiles, Disati diesel engines, and the earliest public jet-engines. In a word, the city is modern. But its people were not always so industrialized. There was a time when . . .

Turin is surrounded by suburban areas which house the workers in their massive industrial establishments, suburban areas ranging from tenement districts to lovely villa-type homes. One of these suburbs, now changed, was known toward the end of the last century as "the Cardelli." It was a pleasant, landscaped land dominated by spacious, easy homes in which many of the minor executives of Turin plants lived, when the city was beginning to develop. One lovely home housed the family of Giacomo Belltadore, who managed a small generator-manufacturing factory in Turin.

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On the night of October 17, 1904, he and his wife Luisa were waiting for the return of their young daughter Angelina from a dancing school which she attended. Ordinarily she came home about 7 o'clock in a hired carriage. Unfortunately she did not return that evening. Belltadore and his wife were frantic with worry and went out to seek her, without success. Of course they called the police at once and for the next day and night they searched for her. She was found.

In the nearby forested stretch that belted the suburb, the horribly torn and mutilated body of eleven-year-old Angelina Belltadore was found. Of course, the whole town was aroused over the crime. A vast-scale search was instituted as soon as possible for whoever had done the terrible deed. In spite of the most painstaking care and the minutest search, no clue was found that would incriminate anyone. The motive was as obscure.

There the matter languished. Giacomo and his wife were left with their grief. The newspapers had widely played up the event, hoping to acquaint everyone with the fact that some sort of an inhuman beast was loose in the area. Then tragedy struck again. A neighbor of the Belltadores lost a seven-year-old boy under similar circumstances. This was too much. An organized manhunt was begun which by all the rules of reason should have succeeded in tracking down the wretched killer. It proceeded for weeks without the slightest success. Both crimes were being widely discussed all over Italy. Belltadore spent most of his time in the woods, armed, in an effort to locate who or what had caused the terrible deaths.

About six months after all this had occurred, one of the local gendarmes was strolling through the forest one evening when he spotted something lying in the path before him. He dashed up to it, and found the body of Giacomo Belltadore, butchered in the same way that the past victims had been. In all three cases it appeared as if some one with inhuman strength had committed

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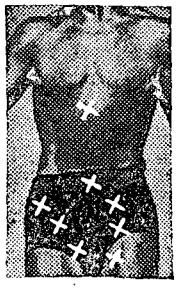

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the crimes, for Belltadore's gun, a rifle, was bent and twisted as if a pair of huge hands had done it. No effort was spared now to trace the "monster of Cardelli," as the mysterious attacker had become known. But the "monster of Cardelli" was never found. No other crimes were attributed to him, but those three. In spite of all that the police and vengeful citizenry could do no clue could be located that would establish the identity of the monster. Even to present times, the crimes are discussed in Turin and the monster of Cardelli is still an ever-present mystery that many people have tried to solve. It is remarkable, in fact it is almost incapable of understanding, how it was possible for these things to have been done without anyone catching so much as even a bare glimpse of whatever the *thing* was. The local peasantry imply that the "monster of Cardelli" was not a man, nor a beast, but something else: . . .

BEYOND THE SKY

☆ By June Lurie ☆

THE mystery of the Flying Disks which has recently swept the country has added one more to a long line of mysterious phenomena. In particular the metallic material that is supposed to have been deposited by the flying disks offers a great opportunity for speculation. Where it came from, what it is exactly and what were the reasons for its deposit are occupying a great many interested people. But by no means is it unique. All through the history of man, strange things have fallen from the sky and have never been satisfactorily explained. Charles Fort, the outstanding investigator of this sort of thing, has catalogued thousands of instances where things have fallen from the heavens, things as diverse as frogs and metallic fragments.

In 1934, in the city of Lyon, France, an incident occurred causing a great deal of interest in the French press at the time, but little interest in the external world which was inclined to attribute it to Gallic enthusiasm for the mysterious. Martin Lefebre was a French student attending the University at the time and he was the original observer of the event. He was returning from school one evening after having attended a class in physics. It was a warm summer evening and the sky overhead was remarkably clear. He was walking slowly, his gaze half-riveted on the ground, and somewhat lost in thought as is the fashion of students everywhere. Suddenly he heard a sound—it was a sudden *Woosh* as of a gliding plane. Instantly he looked up and saw a dark shape overhead. He could not recognize clearly what it was or even its shape and distance from the ground. All he knew was that some strange object had whizzed by across the sky over him. At the same instant, he saw some-

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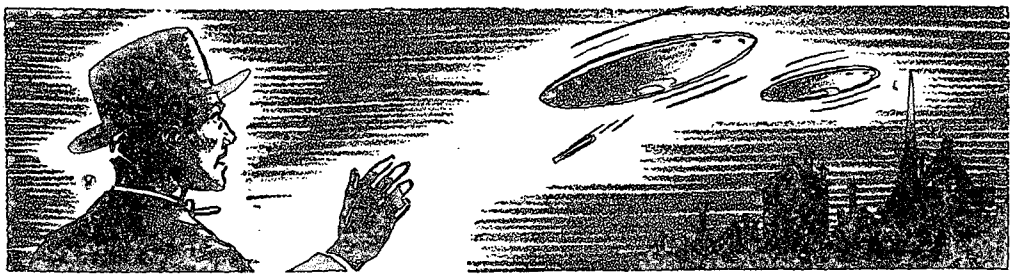

thing fall from the vessal (or whatever it was); there was a brief, not-intense flare of light, and the falling object headed straight for the ground.

Martin Lefebre was a conscientious observer, and his training in physics let him have little play in his imagination. Consequently, he attempted no explanations. He headed immediately for the spot where he thought the object had fallen. The ship or object overhead had long since disappeared. It, the object, was surprisingly easy for him to locate, because it had fallen directly ahead of his path toward the outskirts of the city where he lived.

He reached the position where he thought the object had fallen and looked around. Almost at once he found it. It was lying to one side of the road—it had obviously been aimed at the white concrete-surfaced road—and it was not very large.

Lefebre examined it closely. It was a cylinder of metal about 50 centimeters long (18 inches), and about 10 centimeters (4 inches) in diameter. There were no markings on it nor were there any orifices in it. It was simply a metal cylinder. He took it home with him and the next day brought it to school. He told the story to his professors who naturally scoffed at it, but he had the irrefutable evidence of the cylinder to back his statements. The metal was examined closely and found to be an aluminum and copper alloy. But it was not in the proportions that are found in aircraft alloys or the like. From its hardness it was apparent that it had been heat-treated—but nothing else could be found out about it. Some student called the local papers and French reporters immediately built up an elaborate story about Lefebre and the "cylinder from the heavens." When the story hit the newspapers, an incredible number of people immediately wrote in describing in

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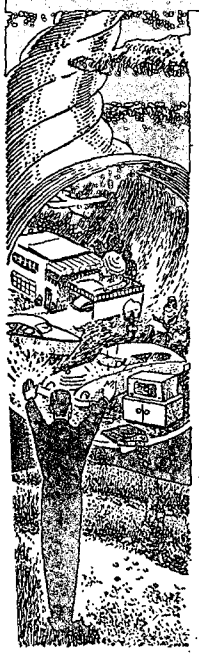

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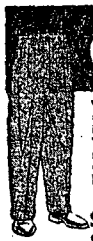

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exact detail the same incident that Lefebre had observed. None had seen the cylinder fall, but all had observed the flash of light that had accompanied it. For a while the matter was discussed at length everywhere and then gradually it quieted down. The final touch that makes the matter very weird is that one year later, Lefebre, for no apparent reason, committed suicide.

GET THE ANSWER

★ **By Pete Bogg** ★

THERE is a subject which recently has begun to receive more attention than it has in the past. In fact a number of books have appeared on the matter, among the best of them, the mathematician Polya's "How To Solve It." The subject is *heuristics*. This is an uncommon word but it means "the study of problem-solving." It is not concerned with the solution to a particular problem. It is a study of the means used to obtain an answer to a problem. Give the matter a little thought.

We are often shown very nicely detailed descriptions with diagrams and charts of how a particular problem is solved. This may be in mathematics, physics—any branch of science—or it may be an involved economic or sociological problem. The problem is given and the answer is nicely reported. But the thing that interests the student of heuristic is the *method* and the *technique* and the *intuition* used, not the answer.

If you have ever solved a problem and you have, you know that you examine the problem carefully, see what is given and what is to be found. You survey it carefully, select a mode of attack and go to work. If the particular method fails to work you try another. You may run into a blind alley, and then suddenly, the correct approach comes to you! Bang, the problem is solved!

Now what the heuristic student wishes to know is this: no matter how logically a problem is approached there is an element of an unknown nature entering it. What is this element? In every problem for which an answer is obtained, the person working the problem knows that at one point he called on the mysterious "something"—call it "intuition" if you wish—and lo, it came to him. How do great men make discoveries? What leads them to come forth with the correct solution to a problem that has been troubling brilliant men for a long time?

It cannot be a matter of cold analysis. Often when two equally efficient minds are applied to a problem one obtains the answer before the other, or perhaps the other obtains it not at all. Why should this be? What little agency within one's brain enables him to see the obscure or missing

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relationship? He was no more intelligent—yet he got the answer first.

THIS intuition, this method that lies in our brain and which we are not conscious of, is a subject worthy of study. A certain mysticism envelopes it. We cannot pin it down with rhyme and reason. It is too delicate for that. We are trying for a solution—then out of the dark it pops into the mind! This smacks of the unknown. Is there an answer? When you study the creative work of great people you find that there is no method of abstracting that subtle element from their stories of their creative techniques. Each of us is so unique and our method of communication so poor, that to get something from A' brain to B's—something so fragile and delicate—is well-nigh impossible. It is there that we detect a flaw in our understanding of how things are solved. We cannot convey from one brain to another, a thought which even we cannot understand.

A tries to solve a problem and succeeds in so doing (let us consider this hypothetical case). He tries to tell B just how he went about it. "I followed this chain of reasoning," he says, "and eventually I came to this answer—so." "Fine," says B, "but here, on point twenty-one—I don't see how that came to you. There is no rule." "Well," answers A, "I know that; it just came to me. I saw the relationship very clearly." "Yes," questions B again, "but, *why that* particuar method? It doesn't make sense. I admit it is correct, but what prompted you to do it exactly that way?" "Frankly," replies A, "I don't know. *It just came to me.*"

And that is just about it. A could have talked to B for ten thousand years without ever convincing him that such and such was the way the answer came to him. It was purely intuitive. It affects one man more or less than another. No two are equally gifted.

Now when the cold, logical eye of modern science is placed into focus on this problem of heuristic, it draws a blank. We cannot understand how one man receives his intuitive suggestions any more than we can understand the fundamental nature of mathematics. We know it exists; that is all. For example, why should it have suddenly struck Sir Isaac Newton that an attraction exists between all material things. Men watched things fall for a long time, yet never thought of this. Why, Newton? It is much easier to understand why he would suggest that they attract each other with a force inversely proportional to the square of their distances—that's simply logical. But to even think that they attract each other—that is the profound problem. The other is easy.

As time goes on and this new field of the "study of study" developes, we will probably learn more about these mysterious activities of the human mind. Until then, we will go bumbling along—getting answers.

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DRESSING-ROOM VOICE

By Jon Barry

The Story of an Opera Singer's Weird Experience

THERE is hardly a fan or reader of science-fiction or fantastic fiction that does not know the name of Charles Fort. His numerous books, consisting primarily of compilations of phenomena that were well-authenticated, but inexplicable in terms of science embarrassed many who think that in scientific reasoning there is an answer to everything. How wrong he has shown those to be! So many things have occured daily in the world, and *are* occuring, for which there is no logical explanation that one is forced to believe there is more to Fort's collection than appears at a first glance.

How often has a disappearance occured, completely unexplained by the police? How often have reliable observers reported seeing strange objects at sea and in the sky? How often have observers reported voices for which there was no rational explanation? The answer is, many millions of times.

This happens in modern times too. Fort was not only concerned with the past. A few years ago, an incident came to the attention of the world but died remarkably rapidly. Had Fort been alive he would have loved the puzzlement of those who knew of it.

The well-known Italian opera singer Giacomo Rinaldi, was in his dressing room preparing to sing in the opera "Tosca" before a crowd in the Royal Opera House at Rome. He had just applied his make-up, and his servant was in the process of dressing him, when the solitary electric light which was lit, dimmed to almost nothing and he heard a voice whisper softly but distinctly, "Giacomo, tonight you will do your best. Giacomo, tonight you will amaze the crowd." That was all. For a moment he was astounded. "Riccardo," he asked his servant, "did you say something just now?" "No, Signor," the man replied, "but I too heard something" After a brief further discussion, it was time for the singer to go on-stage and as the voice had promised, he did "wow" the crowd.

The same thing happened thereafter every night. At first fearful and then amused, Giacomo asked friends to join him at the appropriate time. Invariably, all heard the voice, even the most skeptical. The extraordinarily odd thing was that

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the voice predicted each performance whether good or bad. Rinaldi, had to admit this and while at first he was interested, later he found it far from amusing. All this happened only in the theater in Rome. When he performed elsewhere, he no longer heard this voice. Many who had not witnessed the series of incidents, laughed when told of them.

Rinaldi often spoke of the affair to his friends. A year after the original appearance of the spirit-voice—if you will—Rinaldi committed suicide! There was apparently no reason why he should have done so. He was in good health, had a loving family, and was rising in reputation. His future seemed assured. Yet he took his own life. The affair was not very lavishly covered. The newspapers only mentioned it briefly.

If this was the only such event that had ever been recorded, where a strange voice is heard, followed by a tragedy, we should be inclined to ignore the whole thing or treat it as something that can have no real meaning But similar events have occurred too often. That was one of the strong points of Fort's arguments. He collected and published many thousands of events similar in mysteriousness to the one related above, and he demanded that some serious consideration be given to such material. As a rule the hide-bound conservative laughed or ignored his pleas. Yet, today the same things go on with very little if any, further interest by the public. The "flying disk" mystery probably was the one thing that received the attention due it. No matter what technicians may say, it is impossible to dismiss it on the score of an optical illusion. Likewise, there must be an explanation for the death of Rinaldi. A healthy wealthy, progressive man, does not commit suicide for nothing. There was a reason and any intelligent person, could at once see that it was closely linked with the voice that spoke to him. Someday, real consideration will be afforded the investigators of these "psychic" phenomena.

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SAMUEL CLEMENS' VISION

★ By Fran Ferris ★

ONE night two boys, Sam Clemens and his young brother Henry sat on the levee talking about boating. Henry was about to go aboard the "Pennsylvania" to make the trip up the Mississippi. He and Sam had jobs on that ship, but this was the first time Henry was to go without his brother. Sam hated to see Henry go aboard for he had a feeling that they should not separate. Not long before when he was sleeping at his sister's house in New Orleans, he had had a dream or vision of Henry lying as a corpse in a metal casket. The casket was held up by two chairs in the living room. Across Henry's chest lay a bouquet of white flowers with one red one in the center. The vision was so vivid in Samuel's mind that he got out of bed to go for a walk. So strong was his dream that he did not dare go by the living room for he was sure that he would see his brother lying there in the casket. After he had convinced himself that it was only a dream he went back to the house and rushed into the living room. He was overcome with joy to find it empty. He told his sister of the dream and then tried to forget it, but it kept coming back as it did now as his young brother was about to depart on the "Pennsylvania." The boat finally pulled away from the wharf and two days later, Samuel followed on the "Lacey."

When the Lacey came in at Greenville, Miss., they heard the report that the "Pennsylvania" had blown up and one hundred and fifty lives were lost. Samuel was glad to hear that Henry had escaped injury, but later found out that he was burned beyond recovery. He found Henry laying on a pallet on the floor of a public building among fifty others. Samuel sat by his side six days and nights, and then the end came. He was overcome with grief, and was led away in a daze. When he gained control of his emotions he came back to look at his brother. He had expected to find him in a plain unpainted coffin as the others were, but because of his youthful, pleasant face, the ladies of the town had taken a special interest in him. They had bought him a metallic casket. And as Samuel stood there looking at his brother thinking that he looked just as he had in his dream except for the flowers, an elderly lady came in and placed a bouquet of white roses with one single rose in the center across Henry chest.

* * *

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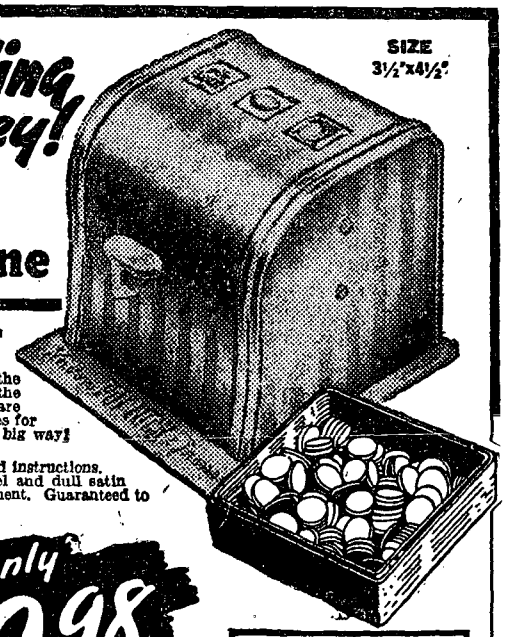

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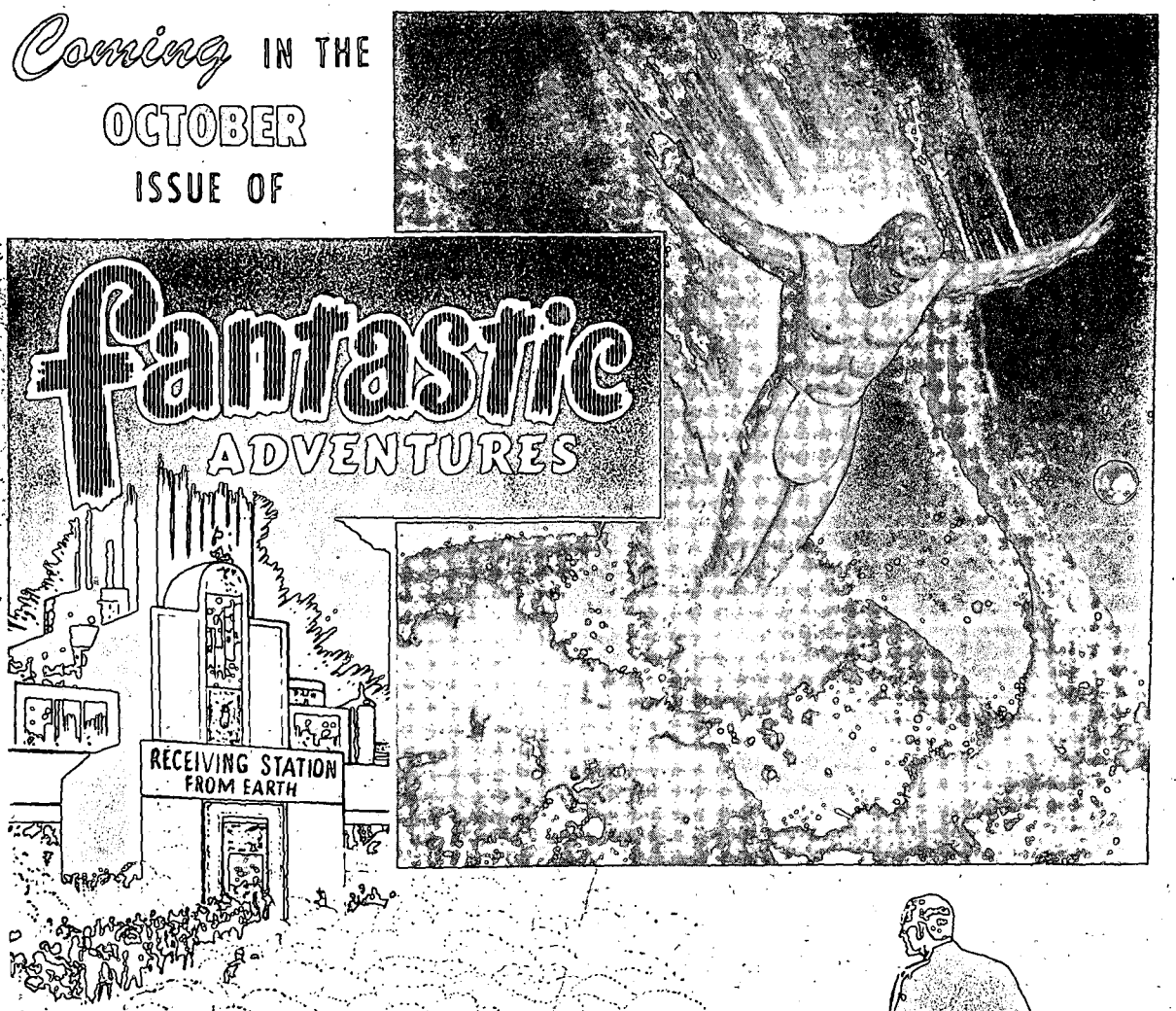

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